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May 13, 1879.

Vol. IV.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 94.

MIDNIGHT JACK, THE ROAD-AGENT; OR, GOPHER GID, THE BOY TRAPPER OF THE CHEYENNE.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "HIDDEN LODGE," "NIGHTINGALE NAT," "DANDY JACK," "KIT HAREFOOT," ETC., ETC.



"HEAVEN HELP ME!" CALLED THE LITTLE TRAPPER. "WHAT CAN I DO WITH FIFTY BLOODTHIRSTY INDIAN DOGS?"

Midnight Jack, THE ROAD-AGENT;

OR,

Gopher Gid, the Boy Trapper of the Cheyenne.

A Story of the Sioux Country.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

 AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "HIDDEN LODGE,"
"NIGHTINGALE NAT," "DANDY JACK,"
"KIT HAREFOOT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WHISKY-SMUGGLER'S MISHAP.

"LINCHPIN lost!—wheel off!—broke down!"

In a dark little valley, lying nearly midway between Fort Sully and Deadwood, and not far from the Cheyenne river, one of those curses of the Far West, a gin-trader or smuggler, had met with an accident.

The rather cumbersome vehicle which his double mule team had drawn from the banks of the Missouri, had not only lost a linchpin, but the wheel in rolling off had upset the wagon, to the irretrievable damage of the spindle.

The face of the trader was a ludicrous admixture of wrath and despair. Volleys of oaths fell from his lips like intonations of musketry, and the manner in which he contemplated his misfortune, told plainly that he had not the power of setting matters aright.

"Now, what hev I done to lose a linchpin at the very time when they ar' a-dyin' fur whisky at Deadwood?" he said, mournfully. "Must a man what tries to make an honest livin' be ruined by a bu'sted spindle? An', just as I said before, when drinks is on the rise at Deadwood, an' when everybody is lookin' fur me an' the cargo? Things was goin' along swimmin'-like, an' I war countin' up the profits when, kerchuck! went the wheel, an' I came down like a speculator's hopes. Whoa!" and he bestowed a savage kick in the flanks of the nearest mule. "Turn yer head the other way, an' don't look round, with a twinkle in yer eye, as if to say, 'Sarves ye right, Tanglefoot!' The way up the righteous is hard, or words to that effect. One hundred and sixty dollars' wuth of whisky; an' broke down when the boys is as dry as a her-rin'!"

To emphasize his wrath, the whisky-smuggler struck the wagon heavily with his clenched hand.

The blow seemed to relieve his perturbed spirits, and he further soothed them by taking a long draught from a demijohn, which he fished from the mysterious depths of the wagon.

The shadows of a brief summer twilight were falling about the unfortunate man. The trail which he had been following toward the west was one not unknown to him, for more than once he had carried a cargo of the vilest brand of whisky over it. He knew the country, too, not wholly unfrequented by road-agents and marauding Indians, to whom his cargo would prove the richest of prizes.

With the butt of a revolver visible above the waistband of his heavy duck trousers, Timon Moss, or Old Tanglefoot, as he was called, from the character of his following, surveyed the wreck of his wagon.

He was a broad-shouldered, heavily-set man, of two-and-forty, whose face did not belie his occupation. His eyes were small, and almost hidden by bloated cheeks, between which rose the reddest of noses—the trade-mark of Bacchus. His garments consisted of a faded cavalry jacket, minus the trimmings, which, open in front and much too short, displayed the dirty bosom of a check shirt. He wore dark-brown trousers of heavy ducking, the nether ends of which were stuffed into the tops of a pair of formidable boots, run down at the heel, and split at the toes for the ease of multitudinous corns. A slouched hat completed the smuggler's attire, and the shock of dark hair which peeped from under the greasy brim, mourned the lengthy absence of a comb.

The little eyes, however, were sparkling, and full of that kind of cunning which the whisky-smuggler of the frontier must bring to his assistance, if he would thrive in his nefarious business.

And Timon Moss had thriven. True, he had no bank-account, but he had amassed quite a little fortune in the precarious trade of whisky-smuggling, at which more than one blue-coated government official had winked. Just where he

kept his money nobody knew; but not a soul doubted that Timon had, notwithstanding his own ruinous habits, a snug fortune to which he could retire at any day.

Besides his cargo of liquid death, Old Tanglefoot carried many other things to Deadwood—packages on which he charged an extortionate freight, and not a few letters.

Therefore, on the day when the breaking of the spindle on the very spot of all others between Fort Sully and Deadwood which the smuggler hated and feared, he had much of this miscellaneous matter on board. During the trip the demijohn had been emptied several times, and Timon had treated no one, either.

"I must git out o' this valley of misfortune somehow or other," the smuggler said, seeing the shadows deepening about him. "Jest four miles further on, an' the old wagon might 'a' broke an' be hanged. Bless me! if I'll stay hyar to-night! Why, hyar's whar the Sioux fell on Brady's boys, an' took their scalps, an' also hyar's the spot where the regulators pulled Red Bob an' pard up."

The memory of these lawless occurrences was enough to stimulate Tanglefoot to action, and, unhitching the mules, he inaugurated a hunt for a piece of timber, which he hoped to transform into a drag to serve in lieu of the wheel.

Armed with an ax, Timon was not long in finding the desired stick, and when with the aid of sundry straps and chains he had secured it to his satisfaction, the last streak of day left the valley, and the pale light of the stars took its place.

Then with a self-congratulatory pull at the demijohn, Timon hitched up the mules again, tossed the useless wheel into the wagon, and sprung to his accustomed place.

The swearing, the cracks of the villainous whips over the heads of the patient beasts, and their desperate efforts to pull the vehicle forward again, made up a scene never witnessed before by the hills that surrounded the little valley.

"Git ep! you stubborn Injun-colored brutes!" cried Timon, who, standing on the seat, was dealing his mules inhuman blows with the cutting lash. "Must the righteous suffer thus jest because whisky is risin' at Deadwood, an' the stock's nearly exhausted? Oh! murder! go on, jest four miles, an' I'll give ye all the feed on board!"

But he cursed, struck and pleaded in vain. The heavy drag obstructed progress, and though the faithful mules pulled with all their strength, they could not draw the wagon over ten feet at an effort.

"Thirty miles from a bushel of gold, an' bu'sted!" roared the smuggler in despair, springing from the box and throwing the lines at his team.

Then he threw his hat upon the ground, and executed upon it a dance which might have suggested the idea which seemed to afford an avenue to prosperity.

"Bless me, if I don't lighten the load! They do that when a ship's in trouble at sea, an' the ship Timon Moss jest now is in a fearful strait. Saltpeter an' soda! the thing is reasonable. I kin fix up a story between hyar an' Deadwood. Fell in with Midnight Jack or the Sioux, either one will do, but the Midnight Jack story will look more likely. This load really belongs to Injun-land."

With the thought of lightening his load giving a triumphant twinkle to his little dark eyes, Timon sprung into the wagon and cast his eyes around upon his motley cargo.

Ten whisky-kegs, with a single exception full to the bung, formed the principal part of the load; then there were sundry boxes and packages, consigned to citizens of Deadwood, among them the legs of a billiard table, and the nucleus of a library which "some eastern chap" was going to start in the mining town.

"Can't throw any of the licker overboard!" Timon said, with settled emphasis. "Thar's them confounded books, consigned to that long-ha'ed chap who says that our great grandmother was an ape. I'll tell him that the Injuns took 'em from me to start a sarculatin' library on the Pawnee Loup, an' if he objects to the statement we'll lay 'im out with his boots on. A library at Deadwood!" and Tanglefoot laughed as the consignment was pitched overboard.

"Thar goes our great grandmother, the ape!" said Timon, and for the next ten minutes the lightening of the cargo went on. But the whisky was not touched, and the only articles which remained in the wagon beside it were consignments to the gamblers, and other sporting men of Deadwood.

"Two hundred pounds lighter, my long-eared pards!" ejaculated Timon, over whose florid face the evidence of his exertion was pouring. "Now a last pull at my straw-colored bird, an' then I'll say ho! for the sun-dance or ho! for Deadwood. I can't make up my mind."

Old Tanglefoot's hands flew eagerly to the demijohn incased in a network of split willows, and he was in the act of lifting the often-touched nozzle to his lips when a human voice made him start.

"I say, stranger, ain't ye losin' a right smart bit o' yer carge?"

The voice, while it uttered the words just written in the style of the frontier, was not rough, like an ill-bred man's, but musical and sweet as a child's.

The demijohn almost dropped from Tanglefoot's hands, and he retreated from the boyish countenance which, full of health and good-humor, appeared at the rear end of the wagon.

"You appear to be losin' a good bit of yer load, I say," said the same pleasant voice again.

"What is up? an' whar ye bound?"

"Bound to start these mules!" was Tanglefoot's reply. "I lost the cargo on purpose, fur I've broke down. I say, youngster, ye're devilish inquirin'; but git out an' leave me alone."

But the face did not stir. If Timon had looked closely he would have seen the mischievous eyes laughing at the figure which he cut.

"Git out an' help yerself to what I've dropped!" said Tanglefoot, imperatively, and then he added to himself:

"Twon't do! It might spile the Midnight Jack story."

The next moment with his hand on the butt of his "navy," Timon Moss glided across the kegs toward the boy.

"Say, what's yer name?" he asked, gruffly.

"I guess it's Gopher Gid, an' I'm not afraid o' anybody in the Cheyenne country."

"Ain't, eh?" hissed Timon. "Wal, the reason is because you've never met Old Tanglefoot before. Do ye ever go to Deadwood?"

"Been there once!" answered the boy, who showed signs of retreating from the basilisk eyes of the whisky-smuggler.

"Then, by the spirit of Bacchus! ye'll never go thar ag'in!"

The revolver full cocked and tightly gripped by hands that had wielded it before, shot from its sheath, and the boy with a cry of fright disappeared in an instant.

"Can't git away that easy!" grated Timon.

"Blast my cargo! if you shall go to Deadwood an' spile the Midnight Jack story. Things hev got kind o' desprit with me!"

The whisky-smuggler leaped from the wagon as the last sentence fell from his lips.

His murderous eyes instantly caught sight of his intended prey, and, with a roar not unlike that of a jungle tiger he darted forward.

But the next moment the western villain executed a sudden halt, for a loud cry came down from the shadows above:

"Whoopee! I'm the Screamin' Eagle of the Smoky Roost! I'm a genuine death on his pale hoss, an' I kin whip my weight in Injuns an' wild-cats twenty times a day. C'lar the track! I'm the Thunderbolt of the Dark-edged Cloud! a reg'lar skyscraper!"

Such were the words that halted Old Tanglefoot, and, revolver in hand, he looked up, as if he expected to see the speaker leap upon him from the hills overhead.

CHAPTER II.

THE KING OF THE TRAIL.

TIMON MOSS, the whisky-smuggler, while inventing a story with which he hoped to explain the absence of much of his motley cargo upon his arrival at the capital of the Black Hills, gave audible utterance to a name well known in the Great West at the time of which we write.

Let us turn to the owner of the cognomen.

Midnight Jack was a prince among daring road-agents. He was noted for his uniform successes, his devilish bravery, and his hatred of double dealing.

The various trails leading from the government stations along the Missouri to the Black Hills comprised his operating grounds, and more than one stageless and mailless agent had made his appearance at Deadwood, with the old story of misfortune which had become an old song.

Tall and handsome, affecting the dress of the Sicilian brigands, with a mass of dark hair falling to his shapely shoulders, this pest of the road was the most frequently-mentioned man in Dakota. He was still young, and the plundered agents whose lives he had spared said that he was nothing more than a mere boy.

Though never seen in Deadwood, *en costume*, his personal appearance was well known to every citizen. They knew that there was a grease-spot on the left side of his soft sombrero-like hat—that he wore a cavalry-button on his right shoulder, and that a few links of a gold watch-chain hung from his coal-black courser's bit.

Thus described, let us seek Midnight Jack, and for ourselves learn something of this western Claude Duval.

About the time when the ungenerous lynch-pin cast Old Tanglefoot a wreck in the little valley, Midnight Jack rode upon the trail not many miles from the scene we have just left.

He sat like a born horseman in the handsome Mexican saddle, and as he looked to the east, he removed his hat and pushed a mass of silken hair back from his forehead. His arms consisted of two heavy revolvers, whose butts protruded from his belt, and a handsome Ballard repeating-rifle—a weapon as famous as its owner—was swung upon his back.

"The old curmudgeon has passed this place with his cargo," the road-agent said, in a voice unlike that which highwaymen are popularly supposed to possess. "I don't want to plunder him of his whisky to-night. If he was going the other way it would be another thing—dust and bricks on board. Let him take his cargo out and sell it. When he comes back, I'll tap the mine."

Midnight Jack's eyes glittered with anticipated triumph over the whisky-smuggler who at that moment was cursing the ill-luck of a breakdown, and the next minute as he freed some of his steed's dark mane from the thralldom of the bridle-rein, he continued in a disappointed tone:

"Times are dull, Quito," and he patted the horse's neck to see the large and beautiful eyes turned affectionately upon him. "If something lucky doesn't turn up soon, we'll go down and try the Santa Fe routes awhile. There's where they catch the silver coveys, and the pretty Mexican señoritas with more beauty than chink. Wouldn't Deadwood rejoice to know that we had left the country? Why, they'd illuminate the infernal town, and drink themselves crazy. Well, we'll give them notice of our removal by posting it on the trees."

The road-agent addressed his horse with a grim humor that exhibited itself in his eyes, and the darkness fell about him as he spoke.

He had halted in an open part of the country, and the stars, as they glowed brilliantly in the heavens above, showed him the trail which he had made dangerous for some distance east and west.

"Nothing here to-night. We'll go!"

The Dakota brigand was about turning away when the crack of a whip not unlike the shrill report of a distant rifle fell upon his ears, and his eyes at once lighted up with the excitement that attends his calling.

"Not so barren after all, Quito," he hastily whispered to his horse, and galloped forward to a tree which, not far away, stood lonely beside the trail.

Then, with one of the huge revolvers cocked, in his right hand, Midnight Jack kept his eyes fastened down the road, over which some kind of a vehicle was lumbering.

Louder and shriller resounded the whip, never for one moment at rest, and a puzzled expression of countenance settled on the road-agent's face as he rose in his heavy wooden stirrups, eager to see the approaching team.

All at once a wild cackling, followed by a series of fiendish yells, drowned the reports of the whip, and the situation was instantly explained to the road-agent.

At the same time his horse gave a low snort indicative of disgust which attracted the rider's attention.

"Indians, Quito!" ejaculated Midnight. "They've struck a prize to-night, and they're making merry over it. When the wild Sioux turn teamsters, look out for fun!"

The wagon—for the noise told the keen senses of the road-agent that but one four-wheeled vehicle was approaching—continued to rattle over the not very smooth road, accompanied by real Indian yells.

At last and almost suddenly it came in sight, and Midnight Jack saw a scene for which he was not wholly unprepared.

A common wagon, to which four strong-limbed mules were harnessed, greeted the brigand's eyes. On each of the hindmost beasts sat a half-naked Indian, whose hands gripped articles entirely strange to them—whip and lines. Nor was this all. At least ten savages were crowded into the bed of the vehicle, dancing like fiends, and filling the air with those wild sounds which

had so often assailed the ears of Midnight Jack.

They had evidently imbibed liquor in no inconsiderable quantities, and they were pushing each other about in their drunken orgies, threatening to overturn the wagon or frighten the mules, already ungovernable, into a runaway.

Midnight took in the situation in an instant. "The red devils have stolen our trade, Quito," he said, between clenched teeth, and with a smile. "They've turned road-agents—infringed on our patent, as it were. I don't intend to stand it. I've declared war against the whites, and I might as well begin it with the reds. You mean, dirty skunks! I'll put an end to your frolic by giving you tickets to dead land."

The wagon lumbering over the road had now reached a point almost directly abreast of the still unseen road-agent, and, as his hands shot up, a "navy" tightly clutched by each, his well-known "halt!" spoken in deep thunder-tones, fell upon the ears of the carousing Indians.

In an instant of time, as it seemed, the orgies were hushed, and the savage who had the lines, rising in the stirrups, jerked the lead mules upon their haunches, and prepared to leap to the ground.

But the quick eye and trigger of Midnight Jack saw the action and checked it suddenly.

The stricken brave fell back upon the mule, shot through the eye, while his companion with the whip, kissed the road before the report of the first dead shot had died away.

Now ensued a scene of confusion and of death!

The terrible doom of their comrades appeared to sober the remaining Indians in the twinkling of an eye. There was a rush for the sides and end of the vehicle, now standing stock-still in the road, but death overtook them before they could escape. The few who left the vehicle did so with bullets in their bodies, and never moved after they alighted on *terra firma*.

Midnight Jack shot with the coolness of a Gatling. The revolvers cracked with automatic precision, and a red-skin always plunged forward with the flash.

It is doubtful whether the astonished Indians caught sight of their terrible foe; but that they knew who he was was attested by their haste to get beyond his deadly aim.

But without hope. The deadly pistols of the Road Terror continued to pour their leaden messengers into the wagon, until the last red reveler pitched over the dash, and quivered in the agonies of death beneath the heels of the mules.

"Playing road-agent doesn't pay when Indians try it," smiled the victor, looking at his deadly work as he calmly proceeded to recharge the chambers of his pistol. "If I could meet with such fun as this every night, here I'd stay, away from the Santa Fe trail, even though there be no plunder in the sport."

When he had reloaded the formidable weapons he rode up to the wagon, speaking kindly to the team as he passed by, and looked around upon the half-naked savages lying in the road.

"I kind o' piled them in the wagon, I guess," he murmured, approaching the vehicle, over whose side he leaned.

The brilliant stars revealed a ghastly sight, for the wagon seemed filled with dead.

But something besides the hideous red faces suddenly attracted the road-agent's attention, and with a dazed "It can't be!" he thrust one arm forward and pushed a savage aside.

"By the gold of Ophir! a girl!" he cried, and with the exclamation ringing from his lips, Midnight Jack leaped from the saddle and landed in the wagon.

A moment sufficed to hurl the dead Indians to one side, and when the bandit rose from a stooping position he held a female figure in his arms, and was looking into the whitest and the loveliest face his handsome eyes had ever beheld.

It was so white it was deathlike; there were no signs of life about it, and a flash of resentment lit up Midnight Jack's eyes as they wandered from it to the Indians lying dead on every side.

In the excitement of the moment, the bandit did not notice that the girl's ankles were bound together; he was gazing into the white face.

As he looked, his own face assumed a wild expression; the ruddy color departing, left it as white as the one he held in his arms.

"Merciful Heavens!" he cried; "I cannot be mistaken. If she is really dead, I'll exterminate the whole Sioux nation. I'll make their land a land of blood. Ah! Golden George will never carry out his threat now. Better dead, Dora, than *his*. But, why did you come out here!

Wake up! open your eyes and tell me about father. Am I cursed yet? Are you dead in my arms? I'll leave the road now—leave it forever. The red devils shall curse the night they killed Midnight Jack's sister!"

CHAPTER III.

THE INDIANS WIN.

"I'll wipe out the whole Sioux nation for this deed of blood!"

Midnight Jack set his teeth hard behind this vow.

He still stood in the unknown wagon amid the dead Indians, and with the inanimate form of his strangely found sister in his arms.

As yet the girl exhibited no signs of life; the beautiful face, cold and marble-like, met his gaze with no return of expression, save that forbidding one of death. If the road-agent had laid his pistol hand over the heart he would have detected a faint movement which would have caused his own to leap for joy.

But, in his anger and his thoughts of dark revenge, he never thought of this.

After awhile Midnight crawled from the wagon with his beautiful burden, which he deposited gently upon a rich, soft plat of grass that seemed to invite its sleeper.

Then he methodically but quickly unharnessed the mules, and with a word and a blow sent them toward the valley where other scenes connected with our story were occurring.

This done, the road-agent threw the dead Indians from the wagon and sought eagerly but vainly for something that might tell about his sister.

An empty whisky-keg was the only thing left in the wagon, and the bandit's eyes flashed sparks of living fire when he thought of the cruelty to which his sister had been subjected by the drunken fiends. But he had slain them in the midst of their fiendish triumph. There were twelve red scoundrels less between Sully and Deadwood.

While engaged as we have just described, not an audible word dropped from Midnight Jack's lips; but his flashing eyes spoke volumes.

All at once he began to toss the bodies back into the wagon, nor did he stop until the twelve lay in a ghastly heap in the bed.

Then he drew a piece of "keil" from his pocket and wrote on one side of the vehicle these words:

"Killed by Midnight Jack. This is but the beginning. Uncle Sam won't have to feed the Sioux much longer. Blood for blood!"

It was the oath—the vow—of one of the bravest men who ever touched a trigger, or sat a road-agent's horse.

Midnight Jack was satisfied with his writing, and as he turned again to the lithe figure reposing on the grass he said:

"I mean every word—every letter of that inscription!"

When he remounted his charger which had watched its master with almost human interest, the body of Dora lay in his arms, and Midnight Jack rode from the scene of his exploit.

"It's the prettiest place I can lay her," he said to himself, unconsciously speaking aloud as he galloped lightly away. "She used to like green leaves—when she was a little girl; and—bless me! what was I saying? Isn't she a girl yet?"

A faint but pleasant smile illumined the road-agent's face as he gazed upon the cold, expressionless features of his charge.

"Yes, she died before the evil days had time to fasten upon her. Mercy! what would have become of her in this Godless country? But what brought her away out here, anyhow? I'd give my very life to know."

Talking in this and a like strain, the road-agent did not seem to note the progress of his horse; but he suddenly spoke to the animal, which came to a halt in a beautiful spot not far from the banks of the Cheyenne.

Indeed, if the bandit would have sent his gaze through the little gap almost directly before him, he might have seen the moonlit waves of the tortuous western river.

Several hours had passed since his encounter with the red-skins who had fared so badly by his deadly pistols. The queen of night had risen from her couch, and was flooding the land of Indian and bear with her soft silvery light which gave the trees a new foliage, and the water newer beauty.

If the valley in which Midnight Jack had halted was beautiful at night, how much lovelier must it have appeared at day with the sun to lighten up every shady nook, and exhibit its many flowers and birds?

"This is the place for you, Dora," the road-agent said, addressing the fair girl whom he had carried to this bewitching spot. "I'll visit your grave every day and death shall be the portion of the fiend who ventures to despoil it. Now for the secret home. I saw it the other day, though it was well hidden. The boy has not come back yet, I think, for I saw him down near Brier Ford at sundown, and he had no horse, either. However, he's an innocent-looking cuss I take it; perfectly harmless!"

A few moments later Midnight Jack leaped to the ground at the foot of a rugged hill covered with a dense undergrowth and apparently inaccessible. But his keen eyes descried a path which seemed to lead to the top, and up this he sprang.

A few bounds brought him to a strong door fixed seemingly in the hill, and adroitly concealed by a variety of wild grape-vines which hung from above.

"I knew it was here!" said the road-agent, satisfied with his exploration. "Now I'll see if the youngster is at home."

The door, being unlocked, yielded to his touch, and a dark opening appeared. He drew slightly back and with a cocked revolver in his hand called:

"Halloo! my boy! If you're at home come out, for I've a bit of business to transact with you."

His voice seemed to penetrate every corner of the cavernous place, but elicited no response. This did not surprise Midnight Jack, for, as we have already heard him remark, he did not expect to find the "youngster" at home.

Midnight entered the hole in the ground, and struck a lucifer which for several moments illuminated the place, showing him that it was the dwelling of a human being, for several rude articles of furniture lay around; as well as a lot of new skins, a pickaxe and a spade.

These last-mentioned articles the young road-agent hailed with delight, and before he cast the match, burned to his fingers, on the floor he sprang upon them.

"I'll bring them back, my boy," he said, as if addressing the owner of the implements, and a moment later he reached the door.

A glance showed him his horse at the foot of the hill. At the faithful animal's feet he had deposited the burden he had sorrowfully borne from the battle-ground on the Deadwood trail. But, for the shadows, he could not see it now.

A broad ray of moonlight fell upon the vines that covered the entrance to the hill-home, and as Midnight Jack, with spade and pick on his shoulder, emerged from the place, he uttered a cry which was an oath.

Something had whizzed past his cheek, and he turned to see the barbed end of an Indian arrow protruding from the vines; the iron shaft had buried itself in the planks of the concealed door.

"Thunder and rifles!" ejaculated Midnight Jack, and as the implements glided from his hands, he drew his repeating rifle. "The red devils are going to give me more exercise. Well, they shall find that I am eager to keep up the work I began to-night."

Another shaft cut short the sentence, and the road-agent saw that it sped upward from the depths of the little valley, and just beyond his horse which, with head erect, had snuffed the prowling foe.

"They'll open with bullets soon!" grated the road-agent, through clenched teeth, and then, with a thought of the girl, he sprang down the hill.

He had surmised correctly, as the next moment told him, for the sharp cracking of Indian rifles saluted his ears, and he went backward like a stricken man.

"Not dead yet, you dogs!" he cried, recovering just as his horse sunk to the earth bullet-stricken. "I'm going to empty every cursed Sioux lodge west of the Missouri. Oh, I'm not afraid to face the whole tribe if you give me half a chance."

He did recover, and a bound brought him to the spot where his gallant steed lay writhing in pain.

"Lie still, Quito! It's life and death with us now!" he said to the horse, as he dropped beside him. "We've been in many a place as tight as this, and always got out. I'm hit and so are you; but the bullet that is to kill Midnight Jack isn't carried by the red-livered dogs over there."

The road-agent took out his revolvers and laid them at his side. He lay close against his fallen horse, which fortunately occupied a shady spot. A glance upward told him that the moonlight would fall there no more that night. His wish

was that it would reveal, just for one minute, the figures of the Indians.

Then came a lull in the battle, and Midnight turned to the spot where he had deposited the body of his sister prior to ascending the hill for the pick and the spade.

"They shall not get you, Dora. By the gold of Ophir!"

He stopped suddenly, and a startled look filled his eyes.

"Gone!"

Midnight Jack sprang to his feet, and uttered the word in all the horror and despair imaginable.

"The red devils have stolen my dearest dead. Oh, you dogs! for this there shall be double vengeance taken."

He was answered from the further side of the valley. A line of fire leaped from the darkness, and bullets fell all around him.

"Living still!" was the defiance which he sent back to his foes, and then a cry of joy fell from his lips.

The moon peeping over the edge of a cloud was revealing a score of horses, upon which dark figures were mounted.

Midnight Jack darted forward, and as he halted for a moment, his rifle sent ten messengers of death into the ranks of the savages.

Wild cries of pain and shrieks of death followed the rapid shots. There was retreating in hot haste; but before the red-skins could get beyond the stretching moonlight, two rifles on the road-agent's left opened upon them.

With astonishment Midnight Jack turned upon his reinforcements, to hear these words in a loud, rough voice:

"Don't let up, youngster, but give 'em all the grim death ye've got in the magazine. Whoop-ee! there they go! I'm the Screamin' Eagle of the Smoky Roost—the Thunderbolt of the Dark-edged Cloud—a reg'lar sky-scraper."

Instead of smiling, Midnight Jack's brow darkened at these words.

"I didn't want any help," he muttered. "By the gold of Ophir! I didn't need any!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE HUNT BEGINS.

THE sound of retreating hoofs was evidence enough that the Indians were riding at break-neck speed from the bloody little battle-field.

The road-agent found five dead braves on the spot where the Sioux band had fought, but no sign of his sister's pallid face greeted his vision.

"You may carry Dora to the North pole, but even there the hand of Midnight Jack will fall upon you and tear her away," he cried, looking toward the direction in which the Indians had fled. "By the gold of Ophir! I will not rest until I have avenged my sister."

"That's biz'ness, stranger," came the unpolished voice from among the little trees that stood thickly on the sides of the hill. "I'm comin' down to take the hand of the feller what loaded a wagon with Injuns down the road. I'm a reg'lar sky-scraper! Hold on thar, stranger!"

Midnight Jack allowed a scowl to pass over his face as he wheeled like a tiger suddenly brought to bay, and, with a revolver in each hand, looked up the hill.

"I want revenge, not sky-scraper!" he muttered, in a tone of passion which he could not suppress. "But as the fellow has a horse, I'll face him."

A moment later two figures mounted on mules, whose bodies bore the marks of heavy harness, came in sight, and the road-agent soon caught their eye.

"Hyar we ar'!" cried a lank and uncouth but strong specimen of humanity, springing from the animal's back and alighting so near Midnight that that worthy had to start back to avoid a collision. "I hev'n't got a card, but my name is Rube Rattler, or, the Screamin' Eagle of the Smoky Roost. Whoop-ee! strangers, we've checked five of 'em straight through to-night. This boy is—bless my boots! if I don't furgit what he calls himself. I picked 'im up back thar a piece. Old Tanglefoot war goin' to let moonlight into 'im when I said: 'I guess not,' an' he didn't. He's a chicken, sir, an' I'm his friend from this night. The man what teches him teches the Thunderbolt of the Dark-edged Cloud. Say, did the Injuns take anything?"

"Take anything?" and Midnight Jack echoed the uncouth individual's words in tones so vengeful that Gopher Gid, who still sat astride one of Old Tanglefoot's mules, started. "They took what Midnight Jack never took from any man—a sister."

For a moment the gaunt man did not speak; he was staring into the face of the person be-

fore him, who, with arms folded but with the deadly weapon of the West in his white hand, was standing motionless as a statue.

"I've heerd of you!" Rattler said. "You never took a thing from me, Midnight, an' I'm always ready to help the man what's lost any of his own. Put it thar! an' let us be friends, fur what's the use of two white men who hates Injuns to be foes?"

The stony expression on Midnight Jack's face relaxed, and the boy opened his eyes in wonder when he saw the two men shaking hands.

"We hed a queer tussle to-night," the Sky-scraper said, glancing at Gopher Gid. "That old rotgut-peddler lost a linchpin. He tried to cuss it back; but it war the most wasted cussin' you ever heerd of. Then, as I said, he got at the boy thar who came up to help 'im; but jest about that time the Thunderbolt of the Dark-edged Cloud dropped close by 'im. We emptied his cargo—knocked in the heads of his kegs—and left 'im with two of his mules. He war usin' the strongest kind o' language. It war amusin' to hear 'im. Did you ever meet Tanglefoot, Midnight?"

"He knows me, at any rate!" was the response, and Gopher Gid detected a faint smile at the corner of Midnight's lips. "That man is not wholly a braggart. He is a desperado."

"Thet bloated toad!" cried Rube Rattler, in tones of mingled disgust and astonishment.

"Did you ever hear of a Sioux molesting him?"

"No."

"Did you ever see him driving along with an Indian sitting on the same seat, as brotherly as you please?"

"Never did."

"Then you haven't been on this trail long," observed the road-agent.

"Not a great while, Midnight. Hev ye see'd sech things?"

"Frequently. Old Tanglefoot or Timon Moss, as he would be called in decent society, if he ever moved in it, is known to every Sioux in the West. He has drank with Red Cloud and Setting Sun; he has hobnobbed with the lowest dogs of the tribes. To-day he is a king among dogs; to-morrow a dog among kings."

"He's got a divarsity of talent," said the Westerner, and as he turned to the boy he finished: "You've got a mean fellar to deal with, Gopher."

"The greatest villain in the country!" said Midnight Jack. "I've seen him in the great village of the Sioux. Why, Red Cloud actually dubbed the hound a chief at one of their sundances. I never molested him; it wasn't policy."

"He said he would pay us back fur bu'stin' his kegs! But I guess the Thunderbolt of the Dark-edged Cloud kin stand the payment of the debt. When any man runs a'gin' me he strikes a post."

Midnight Jack was still angry; the loss of his newly discovered sister caused him to shoot lightning glances toward the north-west and he began to grow impatient.

"I'll go with you to the eends of the world arter the gal!" broke in the long borderman. "I've nuthin' to keep me hyar; no family. The boy—why, he kin remain hyar till we come back. Gopher, jump off the critter and let Midnight take the saddle."

"Not till I look to my own horse!" interposed the road-scurge, before Gopher Gid could spring from the beast. "He went down at the first fire, and I told him to lie still;" and he walked to the spot where his black horse still lay; but a glance at the rigid form and the glazed eye told him that he would never ride the faithful animal again.

With clenched lips and eyes flashing anew, the bandit came back to the two spectators.

"I'll take the mule, boy," he said gently, and Gopher Gid slid to the ground. "With a fresh trail ahead, we will overtake the reddies before they reach the big village. I have my doubts whether Tanglefoot was going to Deadwood. The great sun-dance of the Sioux is near at hand; I guess he never misses such an affair as that."

The self-styled Sky-scraper and Midnight Jack now made hasty preparations to depart on the trail of the flying Sioux.

The boy watched them with disappointment in his fair eyes, and at last, unable to still his longings another moment, he spoke to Midnight.

"I'd like to go along and help you get your sister back."

Jack looked up and surveyed the little fellow from head to foot before he answered.

"You'd bother us, mebbe," he said. "We may have to enter Red Cloud's village, make Indians of ourselves and, the girl may be dead. I think she is."

The last sentence was spoken slowly, and the

youth saw that the thought amounted almost to a conviction.

"Stay hyar, boy," said Rube, before Gopher Gid could respond to the road-agent! "I'd like to take you, durn my hide if I wouldn't, but it's too risky! An' keep both eyes peeled, too. Ye've heer'd about Old Tanglefoot? He'll be back this way."

"He will, assuredly," declared Midnight Jack. "If you want to see the years of manhood, don't fall into his hands. He's a bloot, whisky-soaked by the contents of a thousand kegs; but his mind is as strong as ever, only the devil is in him bigger than Pike's Peak."

The night was well advanced when Midnight Jack and his companion bade the unsatisfied boy farewell, and he stood in the darkness like a youth in a dream, listening to the canter of their mules.

Before departure Midnight Jack had superintended the burial of his horse and the slain savages, so that their bodies would not taint the atmosphere so near the boy's hillside home.

"He's not a bad-looking man!" were the words that dropped from Gopher Gid's lips. "But he's made this road a terrible one to travel. They'd hang him in a minute at Deadwood, and if he values his scalp he'd better stay out of Red Cloud's land. Where did his sister come from, that he should find her here? I don't believe he has one. I'll go up to the hole in the hill now, and get some sleep. It is no longer a secret home. I was a fool to follow old Tanglefoot. It made me too many acquaintances. I am known now. Hadn't I better take up my traps and leave? I was a real gopher before I fell in with that rattle-brained man, and Midnight Jack and Tanglefoot."

The youth who was talking thus as he went up the narrow path that led through the undergrowth to his hidden home, was not at his ease. The secret of his secluded home had been discovered; other feet than his had actually crossed the threshold; he was no longer safe in the rich trapping grounds of Dakota.

"I'd like to see your sister, Midnight Jack, if she's alive!" he said, pausing in the low doorway before he shut the portal. "I haven't seen a white girl's face for a year, and I'll never see yours, Dora, I'm thinking. Dora—what's your name?—I'd like to see you! Midnight Jack's sister. That sounds funny!"

The boy could not repress the low laugh that bubbled to his lips, and while it still sounded he shut the door.

A light which he struck inside revealed the interior of the place where he had dwelt unmolested for more than a year. There were steel-traps of many sizes, and a good display of pistols and rifles, with a lot of pelts, the products of his trapping.

But now his hidden home had been discovered, not only by those who would befriend him, but by the vindictive Sioux, as he had reason to believe.

"You will not find me here when you come back, Rube," he said, speaking out his thoughts, as he discussed a frugal meal alone. "I'm going to hunt new trapping-grounds, so far away from here that I'll never think of Midnight Jack and his sister."

The look that covered the boy's face as he spoke, told plainly that he had come to the conclusion to leave the grounds where his solitude had been disturbed by scenes which he could never erase from his memory.

He finished the meal, and carried the light to his traps. Setting it on the ground he began to untangle the chains, but his fingers moved slower and slower, until at last his body fell gently to one side, and Gopher Gid, the little trapper, was asleep.

But it was the slumber of the cat, for all at once his eyes opened, and as they darted to the door, his fingers clutched the butt of a pistol.

Gopher Gid sprang erect, and fastened his eyes on the portal.

Was it a bear? or had that man whom Midnight Jack had pictured as a fiend tracked him so soon to his home in the hill?

The candle was burning low at his feet, and the room was growing darker each succeeding moment, but the awakening noise at the door still continued.

The boy's eyes were now ablaze with eager excitement, but his hand was steady.

He saw the stick which was slowly opening the door; but he knew that the chain that secured it would never admit a human body.

For half an hour Gopher Gid waited for the head of the burglar to come in sight. In all that time he had not moved a foot. The candle was flickering in the socket; another moment, and it would leave him in darkness.

Suddenly the stick was withdrawn, and a shoulder seemed to be against the door.

Then came in sight the semblance of a human head, and the next moment Gopher Gid saw the hideous face of Timon Moss, whose two little eyes danced like dervishes in their cells.

It was the most loathsome apparition that the boy-trapper had ever seen; but it did not unnerve his arm.

He raised the revolver, and fired at the living target. At the same moment the candle went out, and left him in almost palpable gloom.

CHAPTER V.

BOUND FOR SIOUX LAND.

It was still dark, but the roseate flush of dawn was not far off.

With the flash of Gopher Gid's revolver, Old Tanglefoot's head disappeared as if a battering-ram had been applied to the cranium.

For a long time the little hermit stood in the gloom at the side of the door, waiting for a reappearance of his foe. Far above him glimmered multitudes of stars, and the boy watched for that haunting head to show itself between him and one of the glittering worlds.

But, without, all was still. The prowling coyote withheld his bark, as if obeying the command of some dreaded master; the night owl, even, was still.

After waiting for two hours with his heart beating audibly in his bosom, the boy began to think that his shot had disposed of his foe.

Constellations went horizonward with their nightly regularity, and their light began to pale before the advancing step of morn.

A sigh of relief welled from Gopher Gid's heart.

"He'll know better than to poke his head into a lighted room whose door is chained!" he said, a victorious twinkle in his eyes. "If I didn't send the bullet into his head, I at least left my mark somewhere on his face. Why I never dreamed that he would follow my trail so soon. Midnight Jack is right; Timon Moss is a veritable demon."

If Gopher Gid had known that his words were falling upon the ears of the man he had mentioned, he would not have made preparations to inquire into the result of his nocturnal shot as soon as day broke.

Squatted like a toad, and with his repulsive face rendered doubly hideous by a long red streak across one cheek which bled profusely, Timon Moss sat behind some bushes which grew near the door of the cave home.

In one hand he held the ungainly but dread revolver which we have already seen in his gripe. He peered through the bushes at the door, waiting patiently for his prey to venture forth.

Midnight Jack had not given the man a wrong character. There were but few persons who really knew him. He had no attributes of manhood left; the vilest of the vile, with the nature of the hyena coupled to a brutishness that ruled more than one Indian camp, Timon Moss had no equal. Whether engaged in the sale of smuggled whisky, or attending a sun-dance, clad in the paraphernalia of a Sioux chief, which rendered his quatty figure the more ridiculous, he never lost sight of one thing—hatred of the weak. His brutality had more than once called forth Red Cloud's interference in his behalf; for the brutal kicking of Indian children and Indian dogs had put his worthless life in jeopardy.

And this desperate specimen of humanity could bring certain Government officials into disrepute by some revelations which it was in his power to make!

He had not tarried long on the spot where Rube Rattler and the boy trapper had demolished his cargo of evil spirits. You touched Tanglefoot's heart through his whisky; and the loss of that was enough to arouse all the tigerishness of his nature.

He turned his back upon Deadwood with an oath that would have driven the color from Gopher Gid's face could he have heard, and threw himself upon that trail which had led him to the cave home of the boy who had incurred his uncompromising anger.

His fiery eyeballs saw the morning dawn with no admiration for the pretty streaks of grayish light.

He knew that Gopher Gid was the sole tenant of the hole in the hill, and ready for the work in which he reveled, the spider waited for the fly.

At last the door slowly opened, and the whisky-smuggler saw the anxious face of his boy enemy.

"I didn't kill him—that's certain," muttered

the boy trapper. "Leastwise, he isn't here to tell me this. Aha! Tanglefoot, that ball passed too near your face. It was a gentle reminder for you to keep your distance, and to knock when you come visiting."

Another step and Gopher Gid stood beyond the threshold of his habitation, and so near that the eyes of Tanglefoot seemed to dart their fire upon him.

Suddenly the tiger in wait crouched nearer to the earth, and then, with a roar not unlike that of the jungle king, he sprang up and at his prey.

Gopher Gid heard the cry, and turned to see the bushes bend before the leaping foe, and to find himself crushed back before he could lift the pistol clutched by his right hand.

The twain went over together, the weight of the smuggler bearing his young victim to the ground.

Gopher Gid struggled with all his strength, which, when exerted to its fullest capacity, made him no mean match, for a brief time, for the clumsy man.

They rolled down the hill together, over and over, like amateur wrestlers; but the strength of Tanglefoot was bound to win.

The boy tried in vain to slip from the smuggler's embrace; but it was like the hug of the she bear, and the fumes of bad liquor almost overpowered him. As Gid went back the revolver was torn from his hand, nor could it be regained. Tanglefoot used no weapon, and when they reached the foot of the hill, Gid found himself lifted in mid-air and held out at arm's-length by the panting ogre.

For several moments Tanglefoot said nothing, but continued to glare at his prize.

"Caught!" he cried. "Nobody who ever done Timon Moss a wrong ever got away in the end. It war fun to bust the whisky-kegs; but the laugh will be on the other side of the face afore the game is played clear out. Say, whar's that jinted individual who did most of the breaking, my delicate child? He called himself the Screamin' Eagle of some kind o' roost; but bless me ef I ever see'd 'im afore! What! ain't yer goin' to speak? Chaw a little talk fur King Timon, er, by the ghost of Hamlet! I'll shake yer mossakins off."

As if to show Gopher Gid that his last threat was not an idle one, Timon Moss shook him until his bones seemed jumbled up in his body.

"Thet's jest an instance!" said the smuggler, laughing at the pain which he could see his shake had caused. "It's a kind o' preface; all books hev one; but I'm a volume what has two er three. Now you'll talk. Whar's the Eagle?"

"If he was within gunshot you'd have found out," returned the boy, with a good deal of spirit. "I do not know where he is."

"Gone off, eh?"

"Yes."

"Alone? I heerd a good deal o' shootin' while I war comin' hyar. Who did it?"

"Midnight Jack."

Gopher Gid peered eagerly into Tanglefoot's face to note the effect of his reply.

The whisky-smuggler started a little; that was all.

"Whar is he now?"

"I don't know."

Gopher Gid's answer seemed to nonplus the avenger of the spilled spirits; he was at his finger-end for another question.

All at once he broke forth with one that shot a malicious twinkle into his little eyes.

"Say, Gopher, did you ever see a sun-dance?"

The boy stared a moment, and said, "No."

"Heerd of them, eh?"

"I have."

"They're goin' to hev a big one up at Red Cloud's town," said Tanglefoot. "Sixty hosses fur the Injun what kin hang the longest. The red boys ar' comin' from the lodges of the Teton Sioux, an' thar'll be more Injuns thar than you kin count. Sixty hosses! jist think of it! Thar'll be some o' the tallest hanging ever see'd in an Injun camp. Rain-in-the-Face hung four hours once; but they'll beat his time all holler. I'm goin' up."

The last sentence told Gopher Gid that he would in all probability be compelled to accompany Tanglefoot to the scene of barbarous festivity.

"Ar'n't you afraid to go?" the young trapper ventured to ask.

"Me?" and Tanglefoot laughed boisterously. "What! Timon Moss afeared to go to the Injun towns? He's been thar afore—a king among dogs. Why, I'm a Sioux chief when I'm thar. They call me Squattin' Bar; not a melodious handle, but ruther appropriate. What ar' you laughin' at, boy? thinkin' of a better name, eh?"

If Gopher Gid had been compelled to reply to Tanglefoot's question, he must have confessed that he was thinking that Drunken Hog, when applied to his captor, would be more appropriate than Squatting Bear.

But he did not express his thoughts.

"Well, I'm goin' to the Injun show," said Timon, suddenly, "an' I a'n't goin' alone, either."

That sentence removed the little trapper's last doubt. He was to be carried by that merciless man into the largest Sioux camp in the West, there to be subjected to a fate already, no doubt, selected by his captor.

He was powerless in the hands of Timon Moss. "I'll bear my fate bravely," Gid said to himself. "I trust the time is coming when I'll get the upper hand of this demon in human skin, and then let him look out. So, I'm going to witness one of those wild Indian sun-dances! I wonder if Rube's trail will lead him to Red Cloud's village? After all, we may meet sooner than I expected; I may yet get to see Midnight's sister."

Timon Moss now proceeded to secure his captive who no longer fought the tide which had set in against him.

"You will do me one favor?" said the boy.

"In course I will!" was the answer. "What is it?"

"Shut my door and fix it as I tell you."

"What! you don't expect to come back, I hope?" was the quick retort. "But, I'll fix the shanty, fur thar may be some things thar that I'll want when I come back."

Timon shut the door of the cave home and left Gopher Gid there while he went around the hill, from whose further side he soon reappeared, leading two mules, the late lead ones of his team.

"All aboard!" he shouted, with a cheeriness which possessed no humor for the silent, thoughtful boy on the ground. "The beasts make good time when I once git them to b'lieve that they'll soon git to kick some Injun boys."

Gopher Gid was tossed astride of one of the nervy little animals, and his legs were made fast to the dusty sides.

His saddle was a Government blanket like Tanglefoot's, and as the smuggler threw himself upon his steed, he grasped Gid's bridle-rein and uttered a sharp "git ep!" which made the mules start forward like arrows projected from a Cheyenne bow.

Away, over the trail they went.

Gopher Gid glanced over his shoulder once at the hill home which he was leaving forcibly after a long sojourn there; and could hardly realize his situation till he turned to look into the ogreish face of Timon Moss.

"Take a good look at your hole in the ground, my peewee, fur ye'r never comin' back to its traps and skins."

Gid's eyes flashed fire.

Never! He would see about that.

CHAPTER VI.

THE JAWS OF DEATH.

"We're nearin' a lunatic asylum. Jest lis ten, boy."

The face that Timon Moss turned to the boy who rode beside him had a mischievous smile, and his snaky eyes shone with a malicious twinkle.

The twain were riding over a level stretch of ground, pretty well timbered, and romantic in appearance. They had left the Cheyenne river behind, and were evidently approaching an Indian village which seemed to lie just over the low hills that rose before them.

Sounds of the most discordant nature shook the evening air, and struck harshly upon their tympanums. Among the many noises, savage voices and the beating of Indian drums could be distinguished.

The greater part of the week had elapsed since the occurrence of the scenes narrated in the foregoing chapters. Timon Moss and his boy captive had journeyed not fast, it is true, but nevertheless quite steadily in a north-westerly direction. Gopher Gid had found no avenue of escape; the whisky-smuggler had watched his captive with the eyes of a hawk, and the boy had at last become accustomed to the ceaseless vigil, and apparently given up hopes of freedom.

"What do ye think of the music?" asked Old Tanglefoot, when the boy had listened to the bedlamic din for several moments. "Not as good as an op'ry; but it strikes the Injun ear like the song of angels. Just over them hills ar' the red boys what whipped Custer last summer. It war the biggest fight we ever had in these

parts. The blue-coats toed the scratch like men, an' it war a pity to shoot 'em down as we did."

Gopher Gid started as the little pronoun that told so much fell upon his ears.

"Were you there?" he asked.

"Whether I war or not, I know all about Custer's last fight," was the reply. "The Injuns call him Yellow Hair. Yes, I war thar! What are *you* goin' to do about it, my peewee?"

The speaker was leaning toward the boy, and his bloated visage was thrust against him.

"You dare not go down to Deadwood or Fort Sully and say that!" he said, returning the savage look with defiance.

"Hevn't I been thar fifty times since?"

"But not as a man who helped to butcher Custer and his men."

"Mebbe not."

Timon Moss grew slightly pale.

"You'd tell on me if you war thar now?" he said.

"That I would."

"Then you'll never tell."

Gopher Gid thought he would never forget the look which Timon Moss bestowed upon him as this threatening sentence dropped, syllable by syllable, from his lips.

Timon had added fresh repulsiveness to his name in the eyes of the boy-trapper. As one who had assisted in the massacre of the gallant Custer and his troops he was to be hated the more, and from that hour Gopher Gid longed with new desire for the turning of the tables, by which he might have an opportunity of avenging, even in part, the butchery on the Rosebud.

As the twain advanced the din from the unseen village continued to salute their ears, and they reached the summit of one of the tumuli to behold a sight new to the eyes of one, old to those of the other.

Apparently at their very feet lay one of the largest Indian villages of the West. Everywhere in the fading light of day could still be distinguished the birchen wigwams. It was the home of some of the noted chiefs of the Sioux nation; and, as Tanglefoot had said, from this village the vanquishers of Custer had marched, and to it they had returned, laden with the trophies of that historic little battle-field.

"Keep close to me, boy," said Tanglefoot, as, with a quick jerk of the rein, he brought Gopher Gid's mule close alongside. "Take everything in good-humor. Ef the Injuns rile you a little, don't let o. They're not lookin' fur me, on *hossback*."

The young trapper knew the meaning of his captor's emphasis, and the real destination of the cargo of whisky which he helped to destroy was now cleared up.

Tanglefoot and his captive entered the Indian town at a point which did not at that moment seem to be inhabited. But their arrival was soon made known by the many curs that frequent the savage villages, and as they advanced the number of dogs increased.

Timon Moss guided his charge to a part of the village from which the bedlam seemed to rise, and almost suddenly they emerged upon the great square, where more than one famous sun-dance and act of cruel torture had taken place.

In the center of this square rose a pole about thirty feet in height, and from the top dangled innumerable buck-skin ropes, the other ends of which lay on the ground, giving them an appearance of being nearly fifty feet in length.

Hundreds of Indians of both sexes swarmed about this pole, whose use we shall presently witness. Not a white face was to be seen, and the boy trapper instinctively drew back when he first looked upon the sight.

"We're the only white-skins hyar, unless—"

Timon Moss paused, as if to allow his eyes to wander over the savage scene before them.

"Unless," he finished, "thar be painted faces what don't belong to the reds."

His words caused a thrilling thought to flash through the little trapper's brain.

Perhaps Rube Rattler and Midnight Jack had reached the Sioux village in pursuit of the Indians who had carried off the hunter's sister. Did Timon Moss think of them when he qualified the sentence which he had just spoken?

But Gid was not permitted to debate the mental question, for their presence was soon espied, and they found themselves surrounded by scores of Indians, clad in wild paraphernalia for the brutal rites soon to begin.

Wild shouts of pleasure welcomed Timon Moss back to the Indian town. Tawny arms instantly caught his nether limbs, and the overjoyed Indians would have jerked him from the saddle if he had not commanded them to desist.

Timon shook the Indians off, and addressed them in a tone which caused the drums to cease beating.

He told them that the cargo of whisky intended for them had been seized by a lot of whites and destroyed. In words that drew a smile to Gopher Gid's lips, he declared that he had fought to the bitter end, only to be overpowered after slaying some of his assailants; that he had escaped even while the noose was dangling over his head.

All this was received with shouts of triumph by the eager listeners, and when Timon turned his face upon Gid, the boy thought his time had come.

"I'm not goin' to give yer away," his lips whispered. "Ye wouldn't see the sun-dance ef I did."

Then he turned upon the Indians and waved his hand toward the captive.

"The boy is Squatting Bear's!" he said. "His skin is white; but the Sioux will respect it because it is tied to the white chiefs. The fire-water is gone; but it will soon flow in the big village. Whar's Red Cloud, Settlin' Sun, an' the other chiefs?"

"Red Cloud has gone to the forts to talk to the blue coats. Settlin' Sun is here."

The speaker who pushed his way through the crowd halted before Tanglefoot with the latter part of the sentence falling from his lips.

Gopher Gid saw before him a magnificent-looking Indian, of middle age, whose feathers were numerous, and whose dark arms were encircled by shining bands of copper. There was a manly, intelligent look in the Sioux's eyes and his *pose* was one which an artist would have noticed with delight.

This Indian was Settling Sun, one of the youngest as well as the bravest chiefs of the nation—a man who could tell in graphic language how Custer died.

"While our brother is away the one thousand lodges of the Sioux are under Settlin' Sun," continued the chief, with the haughty dignity of a king. "Squatting Bear and his little white friend have traveled long. Let them seek food and rest. The dancing square is not yet ready for the sun-dance. For three days our people have fasted; to-morrow the dance begins, and after that the great feast. Squatting Bear may eat, for he is our brother by adoption."

"Oh, I'm not hungry, but p'raps the boy is," said Tanglefoot, with a glance at Gopher Gid who saw nothing but the stately figure of Settling Sun. "But, what I want to know is if any white men have been in these parts lately?"

"If Squatting Bear will go to Climb-the-Hill's lodge, he will find two white scalps upon which the blood is still moist!" was the reply.

Did Gopher Gid start and fix his eyes more steadfastly upon the chief? Did all color leave his face and a sigh well from his heart for the fate of Rube Rattler and Midnight Jack?

"Killed 'em, eh?" ejaculated Tanglefoot, with fiendish glee.

"They will stay forever in the country of the Sioux!" was the reply. "Climb-the-Hill had sworn that he would take two scalps before he danced the sun-dance which is to-morrow. We are all here. Some of our brethren of the Arickarees are here, and two Teton Sioux came two skeeps ago from the north. Let Squatting Bear look! He can see the pole and the buffalo-hide ropes."

Tanglefoot turned to Gid.

"Come, boy," he said. "I've got a lodge hyar, an' we'll satisfy the inner man. To-morrow the fun begins."

The Indians at once perceived that the whisky-smuggler was on the point of leaving, and began to make way. Settling Sun stepped aside and said in an undertone:

"If the boy is Squatting Bear's friend, why does he tie his legs to the mule?"

These words which fell upon Gopher Gid's ears sent a thrill through every fiber, and the glance which the chief gave him made him for a moment wish to throw himself into the tawny arms, and find protection on the Sioux's breast.

But the next instant the crowd suddenly surged against the animal which the boy bestrode, and he felt the pressure of fingers on his thigh.

"So the old fellow caught you!" whispered a thrilling voice at that immortal moment. "Keep up your courage! we're all here—in the very jaws of death!"

Gopher Gid's heart seemed to still its throbbings; he turned and cast a hasty look at his side, but saw nothing save a sea of red faces whose owners were crowding back to get beyond the heels of the mule.

But he had not dreamed; the startling words

had actually fallen upon his ears, and he had recognized the voice as—Midnight Jack's.

What did he mean by "we are all here?"—did his words in any manner refer to his sister—to that girl whom the boy had such a curiosity to meet?

"Clear the way! or the mules will elevate their heels an' bust a head," suddenly cried Tanglefoot, and Gid found himself riding through the dusky crowd, while the Indian drums and whistles were once more raising their ear-splitting din.

It was a thrilling moment for the boy. He could not resist the temptation to look back.

But he could see no Indian face that resembled the road-agent's.

"I might have been mistaken!" he said to himself.

Mistaken? no! Gopher Gid.

Look at that young Indian who is keeping pace with your mule. See how he eyes you, and glances madly at Timon Moss.

That man is Midnight Jack!

CHAPTER VII.

A TUSSELE IN THE DANCE.

THE torches flaring over the dancing grounds of the Sioux village revealed the motley crowds surging to and fro in the grotesque ceremonies that precede the opening of the grand sundance. The wild music of the Indian drums still disturbed the ear, and ever and anon the shrill yet musical notes of a bugle rose above the din. The blower of this instrument, so strangely out of place in an Indian camp, was a boyish fellow whose rotund appearance was indicative of lusty health; the piercing blasts that he blew told the story of sound lungs, and as he flitted hither and thither over the square he attracted more than usual attention.

His cheeks were always distended, for the bugle never left his mouth for a moment, and he blew as if his life hung upon the effort.

A beautiful silver bugle it was that Mouseskin held to his lips; it had sounded the last charge of Custer's immortal squadron in the valley of the Rosebud, and its present possessor could tell how the blue-coated bugler had clung to his horn, even after death had stolen into his heart. Mouseskin had won the horn; it was his; and he blew it with that pride which made him obnoxious to more than one Indian in the town.

Gopher Gid heard the blasts so lustily blown by the young Indian, but he paid no particular attention to them. A military bugle in a savage camp was no mystery to him, and his hands grew tight as he muttered:

"There's another thing that reminds me that I am among the butchers of Custer and his men."

But there was another person to whom the ever-sounding bugle conveyed much that was mysterious.

We have said that the Sioux village contained about a thousand lodges. This is a fair estimate. They were arranged in a rude circle, and faced the square whose four corners were marked by the lodges of the principal chiefs, Red Cloud, Tiger Tail, Setting Sun, and Hungry Wolf.

Standing in one of these stoutly-built birchen habitations, with her face pressed against a crevice, through which came the light of the distant stars, and the hubbub without, was a young Indian girl.

She was clad in half-civilized garments; her beautiful hair hung in wavy splendor down her back, and her feet, small and shapely, were incased in moccasins which had never been made for them—they fitted loosely, and in no graceful manner.

It was to this creature that Mouseskin's bugle sent strange emotions.

"What can it mean?" she asked herself, in a low voice, while the most piercing of all the blasts was sounding in her ears. "It sounds like the bugles they have in the army; but I never heard that wild blast at father's fort."

The words were spoken in good English which denoted gentle breeding, and a strange look filled the speaker's eyes.

"Hush, Weeping Leaf!" said a voice so near the girl, that she started back into the gloom of the lodge with a light cry of terror.

"Weeping Leaf?" she echoed; "I am not an Indian. They dyed my skin while I was raving mad; and, to completely make me like them, red and barbarous, they have named me Weeping Leaf. Do I regret that I have come to such a fate? No! I came to this country on a good mission—to find my brother cursed by a father and driven from home to become a vagabond, they say, somewhere between Omaha and the

coast. Father, retired on half pay, and proud of faithful service, is soon to go beyond the scene of his one great grief. I told him that I would bring Jack back for forgiveness; but he groaned, and, hiding his face in his hands, cried that Jack was dead—filling a scoundrel's grave somewhere in this lawless country.

"But I know better," she continued, with trustful emphasis. "He is not dead. I am here a captive, not only painted and dressed like an Indian girl, but called by an outlandish savage name. They shall not always keep me thus; I will find that brother. I will pay the red fiends back for the attack they made on our wagon. They have warmed a viper in Dora Lightway—one whose aims are to find her banned brother, and to deal them blows of death. I did not know that that captor of mine was so near, and still I might have known that I would not be left unguarded. Ay, stars! look down and see that I am not an Indian, because my skin is red—look down and hear the vows of vengeance which well from my heart every minute of my captivity!"

As she uttered the last word she moved to the crevice again, and turned her eyes upward to the brilliant orbs of the vasty sky.

Louder and clearer than ever came the blast of the bugle.

It sounded so shrill that the girl started.

The Indian boy was nearing the lodge; he was probably making a tour of the village, frightening the curs from their surreptitious feasts of stolen bones, and drawing curses from the infirm and bedridden red-skins.

"Who blows that bugle?" the girl asked, curiously, trying to catch sight of the blower; but the next moment a dark figure rose between her and the stars.

It was the burly body of the guard, and his action told the girl that he had purposely obstructed her line of vision.

The next bugle blast was broken by the voice of the Indian who stood against the lodge.

"Dog! will you give your mouth no rest?" said the guard, angrily.

Mouseskin stopped suddenly and, removing the bugle from his lips, looked fixedly at the savage who had addressed him.

"Who speaks to Mouseskin?" he demanded, with an authoritative pomposity that smacked not a little of the ludicrous.

He stepped forward as he spoke, his bugle in his left hand, a drawn dirk in his right.

"His master speaks!" was the quick rejoinder. "Little dogs must not try to bark like the big ones. Maybe they make up in many barks what they lack in noise."

"The horn is Mouseskin's! He got it where the Yellow Hair fell with all his warriors. Was Feel-the-Sky there?"

This last was uttered in a tone that roused the ire of the Indian guard.

"Go 'way, or Feel-the-Sky will kick the croaking frog!"

Mouseskin's eyes flashed at this, and Feel-the-Sky advanced to bestow the threatened kick.

All at once, like a panther preparing for a spring, the noisy Sioux boy dropped to the ground, and the next moment threw himself heavily upon the guard.

Dora Lightway, the girl captive, heard the collision, and saw two figures writhing and struggling in the dim starlight.

Feel-the-Sky went down before Mouseskin's assault; he was completely thrown off his feet, and the combatants fell heavily against the lodge, shaking various skins from the walls upon the girl.

"This may prove a providential battle for me!" ejaculated the captive, with hope for a moment lighting up her eyes. "I pray thee, Heaven, that thou mayest send me deliverance. Ah! me! how they struggle! The one seems but a boy; he can be no match for Feel-the-Sky, my captor!"

Like two mastiffs contending for victory, the red-skins fought just without the birchen lodge. The advantage was with the boy whose sudden charge had taken his adversary at a disadvantage, and he was exhibiting more agility than one of his physique might be supposed to possess.

"Ah! me, a groan! a blow! the knife of one is at work!" Dora said, with a shudder for the sounds which assailed her ears.

Then a strange silence came into the lodge.

The battle was over, but, who had won?

Perhaps both the combatants lay dead?

A half-hour of mental torture passed away, and Dora put her hand through the crevice; it touched the rude bar which secured the door.

Holding her breath, she worked silently at this till it fell and then she easily stepped out.

What a thrill of joy shot through the heart of Midnight Jack's young sister.

The stars were above her; the lodge of captivity behind!

It was a moment the emotions of which cannot be described.

Near her lay the body of a man, and near to it another dark heap, but much smaller.

"They have both fallen!"

This is what Weeping Leaf said to herself.

The sounds before her told her that safety lay in the route that stretched in the opposite direction.

"Heaven guide my feet!" she fervently cried.

A shrill bugle blast at her very side almost lifted her from her feet.

With a cry of horror she turned and saw Mouseskin on his knees, blowing with all his might.

The sight decided the soldier's daughter.

"I am not free with that Indian here!"

The next moment she sprang upon the boy with the intention to do or die, and pushed him back.

At the same time she snatched the silver bugle from his lips, and struck him heavily with the singular weapon.

"Now I am free!" she said, and still clinging to the bugle-horn, she turned from the scene, and ran beyond the cordon of wigwams.

The thought of escape lent new speed to her limbs, and she was just entering a line of cottonwoods that stood like stately sentinels in the starlight, when a figure rose from the ground in her very path.

In an instant she saw the plumes of an Indian warrior, and halted with the famous horn drawn menacingly back.

But her right arm was caught before it could descend, and she saw a grotesque red face peering into hers.

"Go!" said a voice, and Dora was pushed on in no very gentle manner.

But the next words sent a thrill through every fiber of her frame.

"Only a poor, sneakin' Injun gal! I don't hev dealin's with that kind o' truck. I'm hyar arter a white 'un, an' I'll make the dogs open thar eyes afore to-morrow night. For I'm the Screamin' Eagle of the Smoky Roost! a reg'lar sky-scraper!"

Dora stood still like a person rooted to the ground with amazement.

She was afraid to breathe.

The man near her might be a friend!

CHAPTER VIII.

READY FOR THE WORST.

"WHO ar' ye look n' at! Move yer boots, or the Screamin' Eagle—no! the Red Jingo of the Little Big-Horn will accelerate yer pace!"

Weeping Leaf, or Dora, saw the figure step forward as these words smote her ear.

"He cannot be my friend," she muttered. "To him let my skin be red and not white. He's a white man, despite his disguise—one of those renegades I have often read about."

Again the girl fled, and left the strange being alone in the path which she had lately traversed.

"I mustn't let my tongue slip any more," mused the man, thus left near the edge of the cottonwoods. "I must be a wolf just like the rest of the pack. I'm the Red Jingo; the Screamin' Eagle of the Smoky Roost is lost till I git out o' this pickle. Ef I war huntin' red gals, what a nice one I could hev picked up; but I want to get the white 'un, the sister of that young devil, Midnight Jack."

"And we will get her!"

"Holy Moses!" exclaimed the speaker, starting from the apparition standing against the nearest as well as one of the largest trees. "War I talkin' aloud, Mid—no! Runnin' Water?"

"Slightly!" was the reply, as the two Indian-like figures came together and grasped hands. "You were talking about a girl—did she pass here?"

"Yes; an Injun crittur. Hev ye been to the tree?"

"No! It stands in a dangerous locality," was the low response. "Many of the Indians keep a sham fast; they have caches in the wood. Out yonder it is full of them, stealing out for a morsel. Deny an Indian's stomach when food is nigh, if you can. But the pistols are safe in the tree. It is not a cache; we will not need them to-morrow."

"If they should find 'em, thar's no one in the camp who kin read."

"Ah, but there is, Rube."

"Who?"

"Old Tanglefoot!"

"And the boy?"

"He would not betray us."

"No! he would not; but that bloated spider—that tanglefooted—"

A red hand fell admonishingly on the speaker's arm.

"A little too loud, Rube," said a low voice. "Too much English in our tones. We'd better fall back on the Sioux gibberish. By George! 'tis lucky that we can speak the infernal tongue—"

"Like er native!" and there was a twinkle in the speaker's eyes that would have proclaimed his identity to any one who knew Rube Rattler.

"We'll consider the pistols safe," he continued. "Thet red gal war goin' out to a cache. She may b'lieve in fastin', but she don't practice it. She's got a sensible stomach."

The other—Midnight Jack—did not reply. His handsome eyes, a little watery, but deep, and full of expression, all the same, seemed to be gazing into the future, far beyond his courageous companion.

"Runnin' Water, I've been thinkin' erbout suthin' that might happen," said Rube. "Ar' ye listenin'?"

"Yes," said the other, now in the Sioux tongue. "Go on."

"What if that whisky-dog recognizes us to-morrow?"

The answer fell promptly from Midnight's lips:

"He must be shot dead before he opens his mouth! His eyes will first discover; his look will betray him. We must not hesitate."

"But the justification?"

"Never mind that. First the act; after that the excuse! Watch him narrowly, Rube; his mind is not deadened by the barrels of whisky which he has drank; it is active yet, full of devilish ingenuity. I say, watch Tanglefoot."

"I will!" was Rube's quick reply. "If my dropper talks to-morrow, the golden gates may open fur Squattin' B'ar!"

The two daring men knew that they had courted a desperate emergency which might arise on the following day—the day for the sun-dance.

Midnight Jack—or Running Water, as the Sioux now called him—felt that he was not far from his sister. He had tracked her captors to the confines of the Sioux town; but as yet his keen eyes had not managed to discover her.

Happily, his past intercourse with hunting-parties of the red nation had given him a speaking knowledge of their language, and his companion, who knew something of almost every tribe west of the Missouri, could, as he expressed it, speak the tongue "like er native."

This knowledge now stood the fearless twin in need.

A new excitement, and one not unexpected, was likely to rise soon in the Sioux village. Midnight Jack expected to hear the tragic occurrences of the Deadwood trail reported among the lodges; he even looked for that part of the wagon which bore his words of vengeance to be flung down in the great square by Red Cloud and his band, expected every moment from their visit to the United States forts.

His absence from the village at the moment that he discovered him at the edge of the little belt of cottonwoods was caused by a desire to assure himself of the continued safety of his handsome revolvers which bore his wild name in deeply-cut letters on the sides of the barrels.

These he had deposited in a hollow tree prior to his first entrance into the village. There was one man there now who must not see those deadly weapons—Old Tanglefoot.

His repeating rifle was not marked, and as many Sioux owned such a weapon of death, he excited no suspicion by carrying it with him.

Having resolved upon the desperate act which we have heard them discuss should Tanglefoot recognize them on the eventful morning, Rube Rattler and the road-agent went back into the village.

It was now near midnight.

The drums had ceased to sound, and but few Indians remained in the square. The rest had sought their lodges, there to dream of the brutalities of the sun-dance, and to prepare their bodies for the endurance which many of the younger bucks had determined on in face of the assembled tribe.

"Hyar ar' the ropes—strong enough to hold an ox up," whispered Rube, as he and the road-agent began to inspect the lofty torture-pole in the dim light of the stars. "You've see'd the sun-dance, Mid—cuss it all! I mean Runnin' Water."

"I have not, strange to say, but—"

"I hev!" was the interruption. "The red dogs run a knife through the thick muscles of the breast—right hyar—an' put in a good wooden skewer. To this they tie one of these ropes, an' then they dance about the pole, an' fall back with their full weight. It's terrible! Sometimes the muscles give way soon; but if they're extra tough they hold out five hours. It's a sickenin' sight. I saw old Rain-in-the-Face hold out fur four hours in the hottest sun that ever b'iled water. He was just the kind o' man to kill Custer—the bravest Injun in the West."

"Did you ever try it, Rube?" asked Midnight Jack.

"No! but I could ekal Rain-in-the-Face. We oughter do suthin' to-morrow to keep our credit good. The reddies'll throw out some mighty strong hints at us. If we don't notice 'em, it may create suspicion. I'd like to try the dance once."

"You?"

"Yes, me! the Screamin' Eagle of the Smoky Roost, alias the Red Jingo of the Little Big Horn."

Midnight Jack was silent for a moment.

"You'd better not, Rube. You'll have other use for your muscles before we get out of this devil land. Think of my sister, very near us now, no doubt. Leave the sun-dance alone; let Indians mutilate themselves."

But the old borderer was not to be diverted by his companion's words.

In his mind he had determined to attempt the sun-dance on the morrow; and become the only white man who had submitted his body to the horrible torture.

Silently the two adventurers glided from the square, and sought the lodge which setting Sun had allotted to them as visitors.

As yet the death of Feel-the-Sky had not been discovered, and Mouseskin's trumpet was still mute.

Midnight Jack threw himself upon the scanty skins within the lodge, and soon fell asleep.

After awhile he was startled by a touch which drew him into a sitting posture in the gloom of the hut.

"It's only me!" said a well-known voice at his ear. "We've got to do one of two things—leave the Injun shanties now, or kill Tanglefoot to-morrow!"

Midnight Jack was thoroughly awake.

"Go away, without my sister? Never!" he cried. "We'll shoot Tanglefoot."

"Before the hull tribe?"

"Yes."

"But he's Squattin' B'ar!"

"He shall not betray us!" was the answer.

"Does he suspect us, Rube?"

"Kinder so."

"Then not for certain!"

"He's makin' up his mind fast. I b'lieve he's been watchin' us."

At that moment a most unearthly yell rung through the village.

Our two friends sprung erect and listened.

CHAPTER IX.

GOLDEN GEORGE, THE NEW FOE.

"WHAT is it?" whispered Midnight Jack, whose voice was accompanied by the low clicking of the revolver which he held in his dyed hand.

"A corpse hez been found!" was Rube's quick reply. "I've heerd that yell afore. Somebody hez passed in his checks."

The natural words, "If a murder has been committed, they may suspect us," struggled to the road-agent's lips.

Rube did not reply, but with lips firmly set, was apparently listening to the echoes of the weird cry that had shaken the still air of the summer's night.

But he felt the full force of his companion's utterance.

"Did you hear me, Rube?" Midnight asked, impatiently.

"I heerd," was the answer, which was almost drowned by the lonely howling of some gaunt Indian dogs. "Thar's a good deal o' truth in what you said, Midnight; but 'a stiff upper lip' is the motto. Thar goes the devil-cry ag'in! Gosh! it sends chills down a fellar's back."

The cry that had first assailed the friends' ears was now repeated—a little more prolonged than its predecessors, and certainly divested of none of its repulsiveness.

"I'm goin' out," said the old borderman. "The Injuns are turnin' out; we must not stay hyar an' give 'em cause fur suspectin' us, even if murder hez been done an' we ar' innocent."

A moment later the disguised whites stepped out into the moonlight, and into a scene of confusion utterly indescribable. From everywhere

the Sioux were issuing from the lodges, uttering cries which confirmed Rube's explanation of the first yell. Men, women, children and dogs composed the disordered rabble that rushed toward the dancing square.

The girl-hunters joined the savages, and soon learned the true cause of the hubbub.

A young Indian stood over the rigid body of a warrior of his tribe. He was gesticulating wildly as words fell rapidly from his lips.

"Feel-the-Sky hez been found dead—knifed to the heart," whispered Rube Rattler in an ear which he at first took to be Midnight Jack's, but the next moment, to his horror, he discovered that he had addressed a genuine Sioux warrior, who was staring amazedly into his face.

For a second that perilous error seemed to unnerve the borderer's heart; but his quick wit came to the rescue.

"The wrong ear, my brother," he said in Sioux. "You are not Squattin' Bear."

"Bear over there!" was the reply, and the Indian pointed to the other side of the crowd formed about the corpse and its finder. "Feel-the-Sky is dead. There are bad knives in the village."

Rube nodded, and hastened to leave the dangerous locality, touching Midnight Jack's arm as he moved away, and without a word the twain slipped into another part of the awe-stricken group.

There was to the assembled savages a mystery about Feel-the-Sky's sudden taking off that perplexed them. The chiefs were no less mystified than the underlings.

Many pressed forward and examined the knife which had been found by the corpse, and shook their heads over it. It was a genuine Sioux knife, without any distinguishing mark. There was blood on the stag-horn handle, and the same dark stain on the ragged-edged but needle-pointed blade.

The finder of the corpse offered no solution of the mystery; but there were several young Indians who exchanged significant glances when they caught sight of the dead.

"White girl kill Feel-the-Sky and run off!" whispered one.

"Not strong enough."

"White girl's quick as a cat sometimes. Catch Feel-the-Sky asleep, mebbe; find knife in the lodge. If she no kill Feel-the-Sky, who did?"

"Come! we go see."

Determined to set their doubts at rest, the red trio stole secretly from the crowd, crossed the square, and glided toward the scene of the nocturnal tussle between Feel-the-Sky and his assassin.

They were the Indians who had helped to snatch Dora Lightway from her brother's protection down on the Deadwood trail; they had witnessed and assisted in the dyeing of the captive's skin, and, for a few horses and a rifle or two, had sold their interest in her to the Indian who now lay dead on the dancing-square, slain by Mouseskin, the bugler.

"Stay hyar, or meet me in the lodge," whispered Rube, this time at the right ear. "Some young bucks are up to su'thin'."

He had caught enough of the young reds' words to excite his curiosity, and, leaving Midnight Jack in the crowd, glided off after the trio just mentioned.

After awhile, when the body-finder had ceased, and the dogs could to a certain degree be quieted, Feel-the-Sky's body was taken up by Setting Sun's command, and borne toward his lodge.

Midnight Jack watched the proceedings with no little interest, and stepped respectfully back to let the procession pass.

He seemed to breathe with joy; the voice of Tanglefoot had not been raised against him, and from what opinions he could gather, the Indians seemed to think that some red assassin had terminated their brother's existence—that an old feud had been settled.

Setting Sun had said that the startling death should be investigated in the morning, and before the beginning of the sun-dance.

Upon this the crowd began to disperse, watched with interest by Midnight Jack. The female portion especially came under his scrutiny, for he was always seeking for one figure, dearer than all others on earth to him.

Suddenly a voice came from a dusky-faced group near by that chilled the life-current in the road-agent's heart.

"They're here—two of them," said that startling voice, not in the Sioux but the English tongue.

"Right in the camp, Golden George! I know 'em, too; but Settin' Sun an' the rest never dream of the facts."

"They're fools!"
 "Who? Midnight an' the Eagle?"
 "Yes. But what brought 'em hyar?"
 "The same thing that brought me, I suspect—the prettiest face that ever left old Sully in a Comestoga."

"A white gal?"
 "Yes; but come on. I'll tell the story as we walk. I'm tired; jest got in. I rode all day without stopping. Am I on the right trail? Is the girl in the camp?"

How eagerly Midnight Jack leaned forward to catch the answer that fell from the lips of the squatty man over whose head towered a crest of feathers! But it was so incoherent that it tormented him.

"Am I never to find you, Dora?" he said. "Does another man hunt you for your pretty face? If so let him stand clear of Midnight Jack."

That the dumpy man was Old Tanglefoot the road-agent was certain. His companion was straight and well-built, and was attired as many Indians were, in a cavalry jacket and blue pantaloons.

The name Golden George was not unfamiliar to Midnight Jack. It told him that another foe had risen against him in the very heart of the Sioux camp.

He did not follow the twain; but saw them disappear.

"I'm afraid we'll have two men to shoot to-morrow!" he muttered, between clenched teeth. "Well, let it come. Midnight Jack will wade through blood to his sister."

Thinking of his companion, he resolved to return to their lodge, and hastened from the uncomfortable spot.

The Indians on every side were rapidly seeking their wigwams again, full of the scene which they had just witnessed.

All at once Midnight Jack noticed a figure standing statue-like at the side of a lodge just ahead. The starlight fell full upon him, and the road-agent saw that his face was turned away.

"Now, Golden, I'll turn the tables!" said Midnight, and the next moment with the tread of the panther he had glided over the well-trodden ground to the person's side.

The heavy "navy" was clutched in the road-agent's hand, and before the imperiled person was aware of his presence, the muzzle of the pistol was thrust against the back of his head.

"There's death at your brain, Golden George!" whispered Midnight Jack, as his left hand dropped on the startled man's shoulder and prevented him from turning round. "One word of warning and I'll burst your brain-pan. You are a man of your word—so am I. Swear to leave this Indian town immediately—nor to interfere with me here—or by the gold of Ophir! I'll kill you now where we stand. No cringing! Swear! or the bullet!"

The man attacked never turned his head; but his eyes flashed hate and murder, and he said through clenched teeth:

"Curse you, Midnight Jack, I swear."
 "Now, go! Don't stop to tell me that I'm in a tight place. It's the tightest I was ever in, but I'll get out. Keep your word, Golden George."

With the last word the revolver and hand were withdrawn, and Golden George moved off without a reply.

"I wasn't mistaken!" Midnight Jack murmured, looking after the retreating figure. "It's only a question of time. One of us will have to kill the other, some day. Now, Tanglefoot, look out for number one."

Then he added after a pause:
 "The boy! I had almost forgotten him. I wonder if he understood my words? Tanglefoot intends to serve him like the wolf serves the weak fawn. When did that villain spare a captive foe?"

"Yes, when, Midnight?"
 The road-agent turned.
 Rube Rattler stood before him, and the next instant the two friends met again.

CHAPTER X. THE SUN-DANCE.

THE fearless adventurers walked silently to their lodge and entered.

There, standing in the gloom, they talked in low whispers.

Rube had made an important discovery. The dead Indian had been Dora's captor; this he had learned by following the three young bucks from the square, but beyond this he had not been able to proceed far. Still, he was inclined to the opinion that the girl yet remained in the village.

"Every soul in an Indian town must be present at a sun-dance—captive and all!" said Midnight.

"That's the rule," was the Eagle's answer. "Tanglefoot will hev the boy out to-morrer, and onless—"

"Unless what, Rube?"
 "I don't want to think of it."

"Keep nothing back. You fear that Dora was the cause of Feel-the-Sky's death—that there is a rivalry here for her."

"That's it, Midnight," said Rube. "We don't know who gave the Indian his death dig. Ef we did, we might see suthin' what we can't see, jest now. As it is, we've got to wait."

"Yes," grated Midnight Jack; "we must, in all probability, go through the sun-dance to-morrow. But there's one who won't trouble us."

"Golden George?"
 "Golden has departed."

"Left the camp entirely?"
 "Yes. I know him; he keeps his word inviolate. We have but Tanglefoot to deal with."

"He's the only one."

"And now I'd rather harbor the thought of facing twenty Sioux than him, to-morrow."

"I'm not goin' to cross the river till I come to it," with a smile which his companion could not see.

A minute later the two friends had fallen back upon their scanty pallets, and soon nothing but the regular breathings of the sleepers was heard in the gloom.

They did not see the burly figure that crawled from the rear of their lodge, and some distance away rose erect like a man.

It walked hurriedly through one of the narrow Indian streets and entered a commodious lodge which bore a resemblance to the tipis of the chiefs.

"Boy?" said the man in a low tone. "Gopher, ar' ye still with me?"

"Yes," came a boyish voice from the darkest corner of the tepee.

"Good!"
 "What was the commotion about? Won't you tell me?"

"Two Injuns fell afoul o' each other—that was all; and one got a knife in his heart," laughed the burly man. "You will see more than a sun-dance to-morrow, boy."

If Tanglefoot could have seen the expression that came to the little trapper's face as he uttered the last sentence, his snaky eyes would have shone with unwonted light.

"More than the sun-dance?" muttered the boy. "What can he mean?"

As Tanglefoot parted the buffalo-skin curtains to let fresh air into the close tepee, without deigning to explain his dark sentence, Gopher Gid resolved that he would not humor him by seeking an explanation when the new day was so near, turned over, and went to sleep.

"More than the sun-dance—yes, a devilish sight more!" said Tanglefoot, with inward glee that seemed to do him good. "I'll treat the Injuns to a sight afore another sun-dance that'll fill 'em with joy, an' make up fur the loss of my cargo."

The first flush of dawn that stole up the valley of the Cheyenne found Red Cloud's village astir.

The gaunt and hungry natives—for their three-days' fasting had rendered them lean and savage-eyed—crept from their tipis, or rose from their beds in the open air, and at once began to exercise their vocal powers to the discomfort of many ears.

The inveterate drums were brought forth to swell the bedlamic din; but the little Sioux's trumpet no longer joined in the tumult.

Mouseskin, not to be outdone by his people, made an early appearance, but without his bugle. He looked ill at ease—his scanty habiliments still bore traces of that combat which had cost one Sioux warrior his life; and the suspicious observer would have noticed that the urchin had tried to remove the evidences of that affair.

Happily for Mouseskin he was not suspected, and, chagrined by the loss of the trumpet, he moved here and there almost unnoticed.

As Setting Sun had promised, the mystery surrounding Feel-the-Sky's death was first taken up; but the red detectives found themselves at fault from the first, and soon gave over the hunt.

"I kin put my hands on the killer," said Tanglefoot to himself, "an' before night I'm goin' to unmask 'im out thar on the squar'." Midnight, yer end hez come, and you'll never knock in another whiskey-keg, my gentle Screamin' Eagle!"

Feel-the-Sky's cowardice displayed at Custer's last fight did not render Setting Sun anx-

ious to discover his murderer, and by noon the terrible sun-dance opened.

The entire population of Red Cloud's town thronged about the square, in the center of which the pole of torture stood.

Midnight Jack and Rube stood shoulder to shoulder not far from the spot where Tanglefoot and Gopher Gid, seated on Indian ponies, watched the scene.

The twain saw that the boy's feet were bound together under the belly of the little beast which he bestrode, and they noticed, too, that the animal's head was entirely bridleless.

"He's fixed Gopher to stay with him!" whispered Midnight, when an opportunity offered itself. "The little chap takes it coolly, just as if he sat in the middle of a United States regiment. He's getting interested in the proceedings. He has forgotten we are all here."

Then the speaker's eyes wandered through the savage crowds that were visible on every side.

But the only white face that greeted him was Gopher Gid's. Old Tanglefoot, the gin-smugler, was arrayed in full Indian dress, one side of his face painted blue and striped with white, the other colored yellow and striped with black.

This discoloring rendered his face perfectly hideous, and his expression was not softened by his ever-restless eyes.

Timon Moss had earned the insignia of savage rank that he wore—won it in that bloody battle on the Rosebud, where the best and bravest of our little regular army fell.

The ceremony of the sun-dance opened at that moment when the god of day reached the meridian. The heat was almost unbearable; the scorching beams came down upon the naked backs of the Indians with terrible force, and there was no shady shelter at hand.

At a given signal six young bucks sprung into the open space and seized the ropes that dangled from the top of the pole. Gopher Gid noticed that blood was streaming in profusion from knife-cuts on their backs and breasts. Several were accompanied by friends or assistants, who assisted in passing the thongs into the gashes under the tough sinews, and out again, where they were knotted to the main ropes, so that they would not slip out.

Then the self-torturers were left to themselves, and the dance began to the uproar of the Indian drums and whistles, and the yells of the excited spectators. Ever and anon the young braves would throw themselves back from the thongs as if they sought to tear the hardened sinews out, and these displays of endurance were received with cries of delight from every side.

For several hours this disgusting ceremony proceeded. Gopher Gid took notice of everything that passed around him; he watched the show of endurance in the ring until he turned his face away with a shudder. At last a cry announced that one of the actors had broken through the flesh and fallen to the ground; there he lay like one dead, under the broiling heat of the sun. Another fainted from sheer exhaustion, and was released amid the plaudits of his friends, but the remaining four promised to eclipse Rain-in-the-Face's famous dance.

"Thar's my chance!" ejaculated Rube Rattler as one of the self-torturers was borne from the scene of his terrible ordeal. "We've got to do suthin' to keep our reputation up. The dogs hev been eyevin' us fur hours, sayin', 'Why don't you fellars show yer grit?' Keep an eye on Tanglefoot. Ef they'll let us alone, I'll beat Rain-in-the-Face's time all holler!"

Before Midnight Jack could restrain his companion he was bounding toward the pole, in his hand a bloody knife which, with a well counterfeited Indian yell, he had drawn from beneath the old cavalry jacket that loosely fitted his lank body.

Wild applause greeted Rube when he was recognized by the Indians as one of the visiting Teton Sioux, and in the presence of all he thrust one of the bloody wooden skewers beneath the garment and made it fast there. His yells revived the fainting four hanging half dead from their torture ropes, and he frantically threw himself back as if in proud consciousness of his strong sinews.

Old Tanglefoot's eyes flashed when he recognized the new man at the sun-dance.

"Is the keg-breaker crazy?" he murmured. "Why, he needn't make a showin' of his grit. Bless my blossoms! if he'd do thet if he knowed thet Timon Moss was so near!"

On, on went that mad sun-dance, and the sun crept westward as if reluctantly. One by one the Indians of the first lot retired victorious from the horrible ring and others took their places, but the Red Jingo still held out.

He entered upon his fifth hour amid the yells of the whole assemblage.

Midnight Jack looked on in utter amazement. Was the man mad? Had he fainted? or, was he dead?

He longed to go forward and settle this mental conundrum; but the eyes of Squatting Bear admonished him to stand still.

More than once during that eventful day their not too friendly glances had met.

If Midnight Jack had doubted his discovery by the gin-trader, he doubted no longer. The catastrophe, bound to come, was not far off. Where he had stood from early morning the road-agent awaited it.

"Thar's some shenanagan about that fellar's holdin' out!" ejaculated Old Tanglefoot in a tone that roused Gopher Gid. "He's not hangin' fair. Did you ever take partic'lar notice of him, boy?"

"Me? no!"

"Then go an' look right into his face," was the unexpected reply. "Not an Indian 'll tech you, fur ye're under Squattin' B'ar's pection. Thar! I've cut the foot-cords. Go an' look at the skunk!"

Gopher Gid felt a thrill of joy shoot through his heart as the cords about his feet were severed, and he lightly sprang to the ground.

"White Fish is goin' to look at the braves!" cried Tanglefoot, and a voice of approval replied from the chief's lips.

Gopher Gid did not hesitate, but crossed the space and halted beside the Red Jingo, whose body, thrown back, was trying the strength of the buffalo-cords.

"Tanglefoot talked as if I would know the Indian," said the boy curiously to himself. "Why, he looks like all Indians to me."

He was looking down into the red face upturned to the sun. The eyes were closed, the lips dry and parched, the heels planted firmly on the ground.

All at once the eyes opened, the lips unclosed, and these low words fell upon Gopher's ears:

"Keep a stiff upper lip, boy! I'm the Screamin' Eagle of Smoky Roost—the Thunderbolt of the Dark-edged Cloud—a reg'lar sky-scraper!"

With a cry of astonishment Gopher Gid started back.

A viper springing suddenly into his path would not have startled him more, and he turned a white face upon his captor.

"He knows 'un!" ejaculated Timon Moss. "The time fur the fun to begin is hyar. Now I'll explode a bomb-shell in this durned Injun camp."

As the last word from the white Indian's lips, he urged his pony into the square, while he kept his devilish eyes fastened upon Midnight Jack.

"The time has come!" said the road-agent through clenched teeth, but he did not alter his position.

Yes, the moment of death had arrived!

CHAPTER XI.

SHOT!

MIDNIGHT JACK, without apparently noticing his eager enemy, drew his revolver.

At that exciting moment, perhaps, he wished for the beautiful and trusty weapons which he had hidden in the hollow tree just beyond the confines of the village; but he secretly resolved that the one in his right hand should not fail him at the right moment.

Still betraying that amazement which had driven him from Rube Rattler's side, Gopher Gid stood undecided near the dance-pole.

Rube hung heavily on the buffalo-cord, the hot sunbeams pelting him in the face. His eyes seemed shut, but through the long lashes he saw the startled boy, and watched the terrible drama that was about to begin in the square.

"Know 'im, eh?" chuckled Tanglefoot, glancing at Gopher Gid. "Wal, I'd say yer should, as ye've seed'd the chap afore. But stan' still, Gopher, my boy, er I'll let the hull Sioux nation loose upon you."

Our little trapper replied with a look, and a glance around him showed how completely he was in the power of the demon on horseback.

All at once Tanglefoot drew rein and was turning his pony's head toward Midnight Jack, when a loud cry came from beyond the crowd, on the east side of the square.

The peculiar intonation caused no little commotion; it startled the chiefs, and Setting Sun turned to that quarter and commanded the crowd to make way for the young Indian who was advancing at a quick gait, holding two glittering objects above his head.

An exclamation heard by his nearest companions fell from the road-agent's lips as the savage glided past, and bounded into the square.

"My pistols! I must have hidden them in an Indian cache!"

Setting Sun and the other head chiefs uttered exclamations of wonder, as they advanced upon the Indian who had halted near Tanglefoot.

The crowd, at once thrown into a state of great excitement, began to surge forward; but the voice of Tiger Tail drove them back.

"Where did Mouseskin find silver pistols?" demanded Setting Sun, as he jerked the ornate weapons from the young Indian's hands.

"In the hollow of the tree where the chipmunk hides," was the response; but Mouseskin's sleek countenance told to more than one looker-on that he had sought something more substantial than a chipmunk's quarters in the hollow tree.

The four chiefs instantly came together, and Midnight Jack saw his pistols passed around to elicit expressions of praise from the red lips, for they were silver-mounted and polished to a high degree.

"A name in the white man's talk!" suddenly cried Setting Sun, pointing to the inscription "MIDNIGHT JACK," which was graven on the barrel of each. "When did the white man hide his pretty pistols in the hollow tree? Ah! our white brother can tell us his name."

He turned to Tanglefoot as he spoke, and caught the demon gleam of the villain's eye-balls. From the first he had recognized the revolvers, and he leaned forward to take one, with a cry of triumph forming on his lips.

"I'll tell you whose they ar," he said, as he took the weapon from Setting Sun's hand, and straightened in the saddle.

"Well do I know these shootin' irons!" and he held the weapon over his head; but his quick glance sought out the man who stood near quietly, as it seemed, waiting for his doom.

"I'll fire the fuse now!" he murmured. "I'll do it kind o' theater-like, too."

Then he rose erect in the stirrups, and his right hand was suddenly extended till the dyed finger pointed straight at the form of Midnight.

"Thar stan's afore us the man who hid the pistols!" he cried. "He could not pull the wool over Tanglefoot's eyes. Come out an' face the music! An thar hangs the other, playin' Injun, an' foolin' ye all!"

Tanglefoot's arm had described a crescent, and the finger was now pointing at the Red Jingo, hanging apparently lifeless from the torture cord.

"What! don't you b'lieve me?" he flashed, turning upon the dazed chiefs. "Look over thar! Hevn't some of you seed'd that painted fellow afore? Thar! that's right! Step out an' chin the music!"

Midnight Jack had advanced a pace from his position.

There was now a flash in his eyes, which few who noticed it had ever seen before.

"I am here!" he cried, in the Sioux tongue, "and you are there!"

The road-agent's right hand shot upward as he spoke the last sentence, and the final word was drowned by the loud report of his revolver.

The crack was followed by a loud cry; the uplifted silver-mounted pistol fell over the pony's head, and Old Tanglefoot, with a headlong pitch, went to the ground.

Rube Rattler straightened in an instant, for he had witnessed the entire tragedy.

"Stand back!" said the road-agent, calmly, wheeling upon the yelling red-skins, now surging forward. "What is that white-livered dog that he should live a chief among the Sioux with his hands reddened with our brother's blood? Let him be thrown to the buzzards that watch in the sky for the carrion. Will our brethren listen; or must Running Water, to defend the deed, which by Indian law, he has righteously done, shoot them down, and then die himself, knife in hand, upon them?"

The road-agent's words, uttered in good Sioux, had a startling effect.

They stayed the excited crowds; the wild cries for blood grew still; and Setting Sun advanced toward the daring man.

"Go on!" cried the chief. "We will listen to our Teton brother."

"I have but little to say," was the response, the speaker's eyes dancing with delight at the triumph he had gained. "Squatting Bear came to our lodges long ago. He brought a cargo of fire-water among us. He lived with us till he married one of our women; but we would not call him chief. In the land of the Teton Sioux he began to steal; he treated his Indian wife badly, and one night he slew her in the little wigwam; not only that, but he slew a brother. The red wife was Running Water's sister. He swore revenge; he has trailed the white Sioux

night and day—he and his brother, the Red Jingo. They have found him, and the fire-water chief lies dead before them. It is the law of the red-man, that the nearest of kin must avenge. We have done that; in the camp of the southern Sioux we have appeased our sister's spirit. What say Setting Sun and the chiefs? Has Running Water broken the laws that our fathers made long ago?"

"By the jumpin' jingo! what a speech!" ejaculated the Red Jingo, as Midnight Jack finished, and with folded arms, after the Indian fashion, waited for a reply.

He was the observed of all observers; the central figure of the startling drama—a man equal to any emergency.

He stood erect in the hour of his victory, knowing that the lips which had almost denounced him to death were speechless.

Beyond a slight murmur of rough applause that had greeted his speech, no sound followed it.

"Go on!" he cried to the four chiefs, who were looking undecided into each other's eyes.

Setting Sun glanced at Tanglefoot, who had not moved a muscle since his unceremonious descent from the saddle.

"I say the same!" suddenly broke in a harsh voice, and Rube Rattler sprang back from the cord which he threw away. "We have tracked the white dog down, an' Runnin' Water has carried out the law of our people."

And to Gopher Gid, near whom his spring had landed him, he said, in a startling undertone:

"We've got the winnin' kerds, boy. I'm still the Screamin' Eagle of Smoky Roost."

"The law of the Indians has not been broken!" said Setting Sun, at last. "Squatting Bear is not red. Red Cloud made him a chief; he got not his feathers on the war-path; he never hung in the sun-dance; his blood is not Sioux blood; it is thinner than the blood of our people. What say our people? Has our Teton brother broken the law?"

An imperious wave of the hand accompanied the Indian's question, and the wild yell that answered it told Midnight Jack that his terrible *dernier resort* was approved.

He walked forward and unflinchingly took the extended hands of the chiefs, and saw Gopher Gid staring at him with distended eyes.

"Shall the white dog lie on Sioux ground?" said one of the older chiefs, bestowing a look of disgust upon Tanglefoot's body.

"No!" thundered Setting Sun. "Let him be carried up among the trees, that the flesh-eaters of the sky shall not come to earth to devour him. To the trees with him! Where are our people?"

A few moments sufficed for some Indians to place Tanglefoot upon his pony, and, with a gleam of joy in his eyes, Gopher Gid saw him borne away."

The sun went down.

Its last rays saw the opening of the feast that follows the sun-dance; it saw Midnight Jack gliding through the village, hunting for his sister Dora.

Suddenly a hand was laid on his arm, and he beheld Mouseskin standing at his side.

"Squatting Bear had friends; they are whispering together. They say that the skin of our Teton brethren is white, but they lie. They are mad; they swear to avenge the death of the white Sioux."

"Not out of the fire yet!" muttered the road-agent, and then he drew the boy aside.

"You are our brother?"

"Yes; the whispering Indians lie. Squatting Bear once kicked Mouseskin."

"You know all the lodges, Mouseskin?"

"All!"

"Where is the white girl that Feel-the-Sky brought to the wigwam?"

The Sioux boy started at the mention of his victim's name, and glance around suspiciously. Then he came up to Midnight Jack with a look of trust in his eyes.

"Will Running Water keep the words that Mouseskin gives him?" asked the boy.

"Running Water will keep them," was the reply.

Then from the lips of the Sioux fell the story of his fight with Feel-the-Sky; his discomfiture by Dora followed.

Midnight listened without a word until the boy finished.

"But the captive?"

"She it was who struck Mouseskin and took his horn."

"Ah!"

The road-agent started back.

Could the boy have spoken truly? Was his

young sister alone in the woods of Sioux-land, and liable to fall into the hands of Golden George?

The thought roused Midnight Jack.

"Where is my brother?"

"Down at the dog-feast."

"And the white boy?"

Before Mouseskin could reply there came from the cottonwood forest the barking of myriads of Indian dogs.

"What means that, Mouseskin?" cried the road-agent, grasping the red boy's arm.

"The white boy!" exclaimed the little Sioux.

"The red boys have taken him into the woods; they have tied him to a tree, and set the hungry dogs upon him."

The road-agent could not repress a cry of horror; if it did not betray him to Mouseskin, it made the boy fix a strange stare upon his painted face.

And when he thought of the hundreds of gaunt wolfish dogs which he had seen since his entrance into the Indian village, and pictured in his imagination the awful peril that environed Gopher Gid, he darted suddenly away leaving Mouseskin bewildered in his tracks.

CHAPTER XII.

CUSTER'S BUGLE.

"If I could steal back and get the drop on you, Midnight Jack! No! that would not be fair after my word. He forced it from me—curse my stupid ears that would not hear his step! A man would give any promise that was wanted when a revolver was pressed against the base of his brain. I'll keep my word, Midnight, though, squarely, I am not bound by it; I'll not molest you in the Indian camp. Do you know that Tanglefoot has penetrated your disguise?—that you walk over a volcano? But, you'll get out, all right; the devil who guards you will bring you through safely; he will reserve you for me—yes, for Golden George, Midnight. It's only a question of time; we're bound to meet; my errand to this part of Indian-land makes that meeting one of the certainties of the future. Beyond that red town no promise binds Golden George. He is the tiger unchained! he will possess that pretty face that left Fort Sully in a wagon not long ago—that girl who is hunting for the brother driven from home by a father's curse! Mine! mine! my pretty bird; you shall be mine! The hand of Midnight Jack shall not keep you from George Antill's arms. The nabobs of Deadwood shall soon admire the child wife of Golden George, the Tiger of the West."

Thus spoke the individual whom the road-agent drove from Red Cloud's village in the summary manner which we have already described.

He stood on a hill whose summit overlooked the wigwams appearing ghostly in the starlight. He was a handsome man; the paint on his face could not conceal this fact. His figure, tall and graceful, was admirably *poised*; his dark hair, now devoid of the oil which had helped to make him a dandy in Deadwood, almost touched his shoulders, and the words as they fell from his lips possessed a soft intonation that proved that Golden George could play the lover when occasion required.

He was widely known. At Fort Sully he had gambled in the officers' quarters; in the camps of the Nation's wards he had participated in many a wild orgy; a smiling fellow but a dead shot; a tiger when aroused. No one had ever caught this free rover in a lie; he spurned a falsehood; he made love as Golden George, and in the same character he went to the Pacific coast and fought the tiger openly in the gilded dens of Frisco.

Dora Lightway stopped at Fort Sully on her way West. Her beauty had attracted the Tiger's attention; but as he was engaged in a series of games which bound him to the cloth for the time being, she passed from his sight. But he was not long in following the vehicle that bore her away. He came up with it in the spot where we saw it last, still laden with the ghastliest cargo that ever filled a Conestoga. He saw the oath of vengeance which Midnight Jack had chalked on the side of the death-cart. He took the back trail to the spot of the second battle, and from that to the Sioux village. He expected to find the beautiful object of his search there, and did not dream of meeting Midnight Jack.

So much for Golden George's past connection with our story.

For a long time he stood on the hill with the red-skins' village nestling at his feet. The fires in the square were burning low, the dogs—those

gaunt canines that infest the Indian camps—were still prowling around, but quietly.

"Have I missed her?" he thought. "Did I ride to this place to meet—Midnight Jack and not the little sylph? Tanglefoot says he knows of no captive in the village; and if she were here would he not know it? Must I go back and begin that trail anew? It would take me from that old foe of mine, and it is written that we must meet and fight to the death. Why delay that time? Why not go back—down into the village and call him out? My word—ay, that's it. Golden George keeps that!"

A moment later the hillock was deserted.

"I will not go away! To-morrow is the sundance. Tanglefoot will tear Midnight's mask off. I will wait for that event; then I will go back."

Not far from the hill the speaker came suddenly upon a lithe-limbed horse, secured by a leathern tether to a young cottonwood. The cord permitted the steed to pick at the sparse herbage that grew about the roots of the tree, and a light whinny greeted the Sport.

"I came back soon, eh?" ejaculated Golden, patting the symmetrical neck of the black horse. "Left the village rather unexpectedly; was politely invited out, and accepted the invitation with alacrity. It was one of those pistol invitations, 'old chum, that you've seen me give the boys. Ha! ha! ha!'"

From among the low-hanging limbs of the cottonwood the Sport drew a light saddle, which he speedily adjusted to the horse's back, and sprang into the leathern seat.

"I don't like this Indian guise!" he said, vexatiously. "I'm not at home in it, and then, Golden George is not obliged to wear it in Sioux-land, any way."

As he rode from the spot where he had found his horse, he threw off the rough cavalry jacket which fitted his body, and drew a soft hat from his bosom; then a little water from the canteen that was hidden by one of the skirts of the saddle removed the coloring from face and hands, and as he passed the belt of timber and emerged upon a little open country, lit up by the rising moon, he was Golden George, the Sport, not the mock Indian of the Sioux town.

"The shanty is still up in Powder Valley," he said to himself. "I'll go down there. To-morrow night I'll come back and strike the right trail."

He now gave his horse the spurs, which he had clapped to his heels, and the animal cantered lightly away.

Gently the village was left behind, and the queen of the skies saw the handsome Sport of Deadwood galloping across the lovely country which lay bewitching in hill, dale, and silvery stream beneath her gorgeous throne.

"Hist!"

The horse stopped suddenly and threw his slender ears erect.

"A horn, by my life!" ejaculated the Sport, a look of surprise in his eyes. "It sounds like a military bugle; but there are no troops in these parts. I'm near no government station. They have wild stories about Deadwood, that the ghost of Custer's bugler haunts this Indian land; but that's all bosh—old women's twaddle. A horn it is—no! a trumpet—there it goes again. Ghost or not, that trumpet belongs to some regiment."

Across the little valley that seemed to terminate abruptly in darkness, came the distinct music of the bugle.

The horse heard it and turned his head upon his master, as if to ask for a solution of the mystery.

"So it puzzles you, eh?" smiled the Sport, noticing his steed's action. "Don't you think it's the bugler's ghost sounding that last charge of the old Seventh Cavalry?"

Once more the notes came across the moonlight valley.

"It is beyond the timber; at the river. A company of cavalry, after all, perhaps; but from whose command?"

Still puzzled but determined to solve the mystery, the Sport galloped ahead again, crossed the valley, penetrated the timber, and saw the moonlight on the waves of the swift little river that rushed toward the broad bosom of the Missouri.

"Now blow your trumpet ghost or soldier!" said Golden George banteringly, as he drew a revolver and set the deadly hammer.

But he was not rewarded with a single blast. "Fooled! deluded!" he said, putting up the pistol. "Now back to Powder Valley, and never a word about this ghostly sell."

He turned his horse's head up the stream to whose bank he had ridden, and the animal was

already obeying the pressure of the spurs, when Golden suddenly drew rein.

Another moment and he was on the ground holding in his hands a beautiful silver bugle upon whose shining surface could be seen the inscription "Seventh Cavalry, U. S. A." The mystified look in the Sport's eyes was complete; and he at that moment would have formed an exquisite study for the painter.

For many moments he could not speak; he turned the little trumpet over and over in his hands, read the legend a hundred times, and at last put it to his lips.

"I'll blow a blast!" he thought. "Maybe it will bring the ghost back."

Then a musical call, weird but beautiful, came from the mouth of the historic bugle, and Golden George listened with a smile at the echoes that came back from the wood.

But another sound accompanied them; it made the Sport snatch the bugle from his own lips and turn about.

"What was that, horse?" he cried. "No echo, on my life. You heard it; ay, and so did I!"

"Here!" came a voice from a spot not far away. "You are white and to me you must be a friend. Heaven must have directed you to the trumpet. My weak hands could hold it no longer."

Golden George was advancing with rapid strides upon the as yet unseen speaker, and almost suddenly he came upon a girlish figure.

"I am a friend to the helpless!" he said. "What? a girl! by my life! Heaven must have guided me hither."

The next moment they met, and Golden George took the outstretched hands of the suddenly discovered one.

"Ah! your face is white!" cried the girl, with joy, as he bore her toward his horse waiting for him in the moonlight. "I blew with the faint hope that a friend would hear, and you came. Oh, many thanks for this deliverance! I am not to go back to the Indian lodges! I have a protector now. No! I am not an Indian girl. They dyed my skin; they—"

"I see you are not Indian," interrupted the Sport. "Your face shall not be turned toward the wigwams again."

He felt the lithe figure creep nearer to his heart; he saw implicit confidence in the swimming eyes upturned to him.

"I know you!" he continued, looking down upon her. "You are the little lady who stole the hearts of the young blue-coats at Fort Sully a few days ago."

A blush chased some of the pallor from the fair girl's cheeks, and her lustrous eyes fell.

"I was there!" she said. "Oh! the terrible scenes through which I have passed since! But did I meet you at the station? I met so many kind people there that I forget—"

"We did not meet, but I saw you," was the reply. "My name is Antill—George Antill—at your service."

"Mr. Antill—"

"Pardon me!" he continued. "I want to tell you all. They call me Golden George, beyond the Missouri—I mean west of the river."

"What?" cried the girl, starting up and staring into the handsome, triumphant face of the Sport. "Golden George, the gambler—the wickedest man in the Far West? The officers' wives told me to look out for you. Merciful Father! did I leave the Indians to fall into your hands?"

"So it seems, my little girl," was the response.

"The ladies of Fort Sully don't like me, and I don't care that! for any woman in the wide world but Dora Lightway. That's your name, I believe!"

A cry of despair welled from Dora's heart.

The snap of the Sport's fingers and his words sounded like the knell of doom in her ears.

With a powerful effort she started back, but Golden George pounced upon her like an eagle, and the next moment his eyes were flashing like a triumphant demon's above her.

CHAPTER XIII.

GOPHER GID AND THE DOGS.

OUR old friend, the Screaming Eagle, noticed the figure of the road-agent as it neared the spot where he stood, and gliding toward it, apparently unperceived, the twain met in the shadow of a wigwam.

"Wal, Midnight?"

"Let me talk," was the low response which told that the speaker had something important to communicate. "Dora is really alive! She is a fugitive out there somewhere. The reds are forming a secret cabal against us. We must depart. Do you hear those dogs?"

"They're mournin' fur their roasted brothers!"

"Not for them," said Midnight. "The Indian boys are setting them upon the boy!"

"Gopher!"

"Gopher Gid!"

"I told 'im to go to the lodge and trust in us," said Rube, surprised. "The Injun boys, you say?"

"Yes."

"Every one is a little devil."

"There's only one good one in this cursed camp, and I've just left him," was the response, and the speaker resumed before the puzzled borderer could utter a word. "I don't intend to leave him to die thus, Rube. Go back, disarm suspicion; get the horses; you know the corral; you know where to lead them. Let no grass grow under you feet. We have much to do; we are still in the mouth of this human hell!"

"An' the jaws ar' likely to close on us, too!" muttered the Eagle as he hurried from his partner.

Night had closed about the Sioux camp. The inhabitants were greedily breaking their three days' fast by savage attacks on roasted dogs throughout the village. They seemed to care for nothing but the appeasing of ravenous appetites. But here and there some discussed the great events of the day—the tragic termination of the sun-dance, and not a few mourned the loss of the man who had tickled their palates with copious draughts of whisky.

Old Tanglefoot's body had been borne from the village into the midst of the dense cottonwood forest. There red arms had hoisted it far up among the branches of a tree, and made it fast with buffalo-cords. The evening breezes had fanned that painted face, and the long, golden rays of the summer sun fell athwart its strange coloring.

Had the gin-smuggler found a coffin and a grave above *terra firma*? Ay, in the tree-top the winds would rock him gently while he slept that long sleep of death, and his last cargo of fire-water had been hauled over the Deadwood trail!

But, let us to another scene.

Gopher Gid, bewildered by the sudden termination of the sun-dance, found himself comparatively unnoticed. All eyes were directed upon Midnight Jack, now known to the boy.

"Back to yer lodge, boy!" said a voice at his ear. "Don't try to git away of your own accord. We'll be arter ye to-night. Lie still an' keep a stiff upper lip. We've got the trump kerls—a lone hand, as it war!"

Gopher did not look into the speaker's face; he recognized the voice of Rube Battler; and saying, "I will trust you," he glided away, and crept into the lodge which he had lately left as Timon Moss's prisoner.

"This luck will not last forever!" he ejaculated. "I could escape—could reach the cottonwoods and find the river. I could go back to the home in the hill. But I will not desert them. Braver men never entered an Indian camp—a luckier shot than Midnight's was never made. A tree for a coffin, Timon Moss! Ah! no more whisky-smuggling over this border. You said I'd never see my hole in the ground again. False prophet! not one of my traps will ever touch your vile fingers! Where is Midnight's sister? Ah! there is the puzzle! Is she here? Am I near that girl who seems a myth?"

The boy ceased, for the subject grew deeper as he talked, and he resolved to bide the promised coming of his two friends.

The sun went down; the darkness came and at last a slight noise drew Gopher to the curtains.

"Deceived!" he said. "I thought I heard a step. A dog, perhaps—"

At that moment a dark figure sprung into the lodge and the little trapper went down before it. He felt the naked arm of an Indian about him, and the next moment the wigwam was filled with an unseen, jabbering crowd.

Resistance was in vain; the boy was overpowered and almost before he could recover his scattered thoughts, he found himself being dragged unceremoniously through the street. The figures of his captors, as he saw them in the starlight, were those of boys of his own age. There were sixty or more, and their savage delight knew no bounds.

But Gopher Gid saw more than that during that forced journey. For each boy, there seemed at least two dogs. There were canines of all species, sizes and conditions: the mangy cur, the gaunt bull-hound, the deer-slayer. They resembled a pack of wolves, leaping over one another, snapping, snarling, and actually bit-

ing, all the time making night hideous with their yelps. The red boys tried to quiet the brutes, but in vain; their words and blows served to increase the tumult, and in this manner, surrounded by the noisy pack, Gopher Gid was hurried toward a fate which Indian ingenuity had devised.

On, on went the Indian boys with their helpless victim. Two of the stoutest—real little athletes—gripped the young trapper's arms, and at a rapid pace he was jerked over logs and rattled across the open space, until, at last, the torturing band came to a halt. The middle of the cottonwood forest had been reached; and as the boy trapper was thrown to the ground, exhausted and with arms seemingly wrenched from their sockets, the dogs rushed upon him with yells of glee. But the red boys made an attack upon the animals and clubbed them back without mercy, so that Gopher Gid made a miraculous escape from their teeth.

In the midst of the boy's conjectures as to the fate in store for him, he was jerked to his feet and lashed to the tree under whose wide-spreading branches he had been released. It took one-half of the Indian boys to keep the dogs back. The curs continually darted at his legs, and in their frantic efforts to reach them so excited the larger animals that the stout clubs of the urchins were constantly employed in belaboring them.

"What if they should actually set the brutes upon me!" thought Gopher Gid. "I would be torn to pieces in the twinkling of an eye, and Rube and Midnight still in the village unconscious of my danger. Oh! you scarlet imp! give me but a revolver, and the trail that I may have to travel to-night will not be a lonely one. By the gold of Ophir! as Midnight says, I'd have company!"

The tying process did not last long.

Gopher Gid's arms were left free; but cords secured his legs to the stately cottonwood.

"Are they going to give me a chance?" passed through his mind. "A good club would not come amiss, and I'd agree to furnish meat for the next dog-feast."

And the boy laughed grimly, and his eyes flashed with delight as a long stick, green and stout, was thrust forward.

"Boy fight the dogs!" said the leader of the boys in tolerable English. "If he kill 'em all, Indians let 'im go, mebbe. White boy afeared to meet 'em?"

"Afraid? No, you scarlet imps of Tophet!" was the response as Gopher's hands closed about the cudgel. "If you want to try the muscle of Gopher Gid just whip your hounds off and come at me yourselves."

A series of fiendish laughs greeted this outburst of defiance; but it was not to be taken up.

The crowd drew back and the boy saw that the largest dogs were now held in leash with buffalo-cords, a reserve, probably, for the climax of the torture.

Torches now began to light up the cottonwood glade, and more fully revealed his situation to Gopher Gid. He had been carried from the village without the connivance of a single adult Sioux; but he did not know this. The Indian boys had carried out the plot they had formed, and Mouseskin's startling declaration to Midnight Jack was sterner in reality than even the road agent could imagine.

A semicircle was formed before the little trapper and one of the scarlet imps suddenly picked up a cur and tossed him at the captive. But the quiet eyes of the trapper anticipated the dog's destination, and down came the club while yet he was in mid-air.

A death yelp followed the blow, and the little creature dropped to the ground to quiver for a moment in the agonies of death.

Yells of boyish delight greeted this scene and the curs were hissed forward. They rushed upon the captive as they would have darted upon a helpless badger; but the club which descended as Gopher Gid bent his body eagerly forward sent them howling back, with several of their number on the dead list.

"Ha! ha! not used to club tonic," cried Gopher Gid, carried away for the moment by the excitement of the temporary victory. "Come back and try it again; there's strength in Gopher's arms to break every bone in your mangy bodies. What! sneaking off whipped? There's real Indian courage in your coward dogs!"

The last sentence was bestowed upon his human tormentors who were now engaged in forcing the curs to a renewal of the attack. But the dogs were fighting shy of that formidable cudgel; they retreated behind their half-naked masters, and would not be sent forward again by curses and blows.

At last the Sioux patience—no virtue at any time—became exhausted.

"Let the little dogs go back to their half-picked bones!" cried the voice of the boy leader. "They are not Indian dogs; they come from the forts of the white soldiers. Now let the dog-fighter look to his pale skin. Cut the cords of the *King d'gs*! Let them fasten their teeth in the meat of the white boy."

Gopher Gid braced himself for the ordeal.

He saw the leashes slipped from the heads of the gaunt dogs, long impatient for the dreadful attack, and then they darted forward with fury and death in their aspect.

"Heaven help me!" called the little trapper.

"What can I do with fifty bloodthirsty Indian dogs?"

What but fight them till they tear you piece-meal, Gopher Gid—till their fangs leave you a mangled lump of humanity at the foot of the cottonwood stake?

The reserve did not shrink from the combat, but sprung like famished wolves at the boy. The foremost received a blow that smashed his skull and stretched him lifeless among his smaller companions.

Then blow after blow was dealt, in rapid succession, the savages pressing up with their torches, and urging on the dogs which had entered with glee into the mad conflict.

Now the glade rung with a perfect bedlam of demoniac cries; the dogs avoided the club with animal dexterity, but the doomed boy managed to keep their teeth as yet from his person.

It was a terrible battle, such as was never seen in the heart of Sioux land. With bloodless lips firmly pressed together, and eyes flashing, but not with anticipated victory, Gopher Gid struggled against the mad dogs.

"To the death!" he said suddenly. "I am doomed to die! After all, Timon Moss is not a false prophet."

Up went that bloody cudgel for the last desperate struggle, but it did not descend.

Something seemed to have caught it among the branches of the tree.

Astonished, Gopher Gid looked up, and the sight that greeted his eyes caused him for the nonce to forget the army of dogs that were charging down upon him to finish the contest.

What did he see?

A naked arm thrust through the foliage from above, and his cudgel gripped by a great white hand!

CHAPTER XV.

CAUGHT BY THE DEAD.

THE face of the owner of that hand was not visible.

Gopher Gid tried to wrench his club from the clutches of the ashen fingers, but his effort was not sufficient for the purpose.

"Devil! ghost! give me my stick! The dogs will tear me to pieces. Do you want me to die thus?"

But the hand still held on to the cudgel, and the little trapper fell back with a despairing heart. The stick slipped from his fingers, and hung suspended from that ghostly hand.

"Mercy! mercy!" shouted the boy, in the agony of that hour.

The dogs rushed upon him.

One wolfish animal sprung upon his breast, but, nerving himself to the energy of desperation, he seized the brute at the throat, and, with a strength that seemed supernatural, tore him off, and flung him snarling and mad among his companions. Again and again the beast sprung to the contest, over the heads of his companions; but as often was he thrust back by the boy.

"Back, dogs!" suddenly cried the leader of the Sioux youths, in his own tongue. "White boy's club catch among the limbs. He shall have it to fight with."

With a yell that would have done credit to a full-grown warrior, the Indian boy leaped among the dogs, and, at the risk of getting his own skin torn by their teeth, beat them back with a torch and halted before Gopher.

"White fighter shall rest!" he said. "Him brave as Sioux warrior. He shall fight dogs with club which catch in tree."

Gopher Gid did not reply. The battle with the dogs had exhausted him. There was blood on his hands, his face; and his nether garments were hanging in threads upon his limbs. Human endurance could go no further; the brutality of his captors had almost extinguished his candle of life; he could but look at the boy who stood before him, and point to the stick dangling over his head, and still gripped by the spectral hand.

The young savage lifted his eyes, and stared aghast at the apparition.

They seemed to retreat, affrighted, deep into their sockets, and all at once, with a startling cry, he sprang back among his companions.

"The Evil Spirit catch boy's stick! It reaches clear down from sky. Look! look! my brothers!"

The remaining youths, full of curiosity, not unmixed with fear, came forward. Torches blazed for a moment about Gopher Gid, and then retreated suddenly, their holders uttering cries of terror. There was a further exhibition of cowardice on the boy Sioux's part; they turned and fled, frightened almost out of their wits by the hand which their superstition had called that of the Evil Spirit, under whose protection Gopher Gid must be.

But, all did not immediately fly.

The leader sprang forward again; but did not glance at the hand. He now had no dogs to beat back; the animals were flying with their owners, glad, no doubt, to escape from the lath-dealing club, or sharing the terror of their red-skinned masters.

The Indian boy leaped to the foot of the tree. "Wachetoc, the Bad Spirit, cannot set the white boy free!" he said, showing the knife that glistened in his right hand. "He has fought well; he shall live; but he must go away."

Then the knife, sharp and keen, cut the cords that bound the boy's legs to the cottonwood, and as he tottered forward like a drunken man, the liberator with a horrified glance at the ghostly hand overhead snatched up his torch and ran away.

Free?

Gopher Gid could hardly realize his good fortune. His limbs, cramped by the cords, could not support the weight of his body, and he fell heavily forward where he lay among the dogs which his cudgel had slain.

"I am free!" he exclaims. "The hole in the hill shall see me yet. What is the use of despairing while life lasts? That devilish hand has saved me. Now if Midnight Jack and Rube were here! Hark! what was that?—the club has fallen down!"

The little trapper dragged his bruised body to the foot of the tree, and saw the stout cudgel lying on the ground. The hand had released it.

"That hand is dead now!" said Gopher Gid, looking up, and seeing the outline of the mysterious arm above him. "Did they not bury Tanglefoot in a tree? Maybe Midnight's bullet did not kill the old fellow. Ah! what if that arm is his? But they lifted him high among the branches—tied him fast with buffalo thongs. I heard one of the party tell the story after his return.

Gopher Gid could not take his eyes from the hand that dangled above his head. It was almost within his reach. The moonlight streaming through an opening in the foliage revealed it to him, but pertinaciously concealed the face which must be above.

"It is Tanglefoot's hand!" he suddenly cried. "There is the broken finger. But, why does he not speak—why not come down? Why not? He is dead! That is it. He held the club until life became extinct; then it dropped from his hand. This must be so. I will feel the old chap's pulse before I get away. It will be some satisfaction to know that Timon Moss has smuggled his last cargo of whisky over the frontier."

Eager to set his doubts at rest Gopher Gid stood on tiptoes, but could barely touch the fingers. He then drew the carcasses of several of the dogs out of the fallen brutes to the spot, and mounted the pile with better success.

"Aha! I'm high enough now, thanks to my club!" he cried, and this time his fingers touched the white wrist.

But the next moment a piercing cry welled from his throat, and starting back he slipped from the carcass, to find himself swinging in mid-air, caught in the strongest of man-traps. His touch had quickened the hanging hand into life; if he had sprung a trigger in the wrist it would not have closed the quicker; and before he could withdraw his fingers, he was in the power of the ghastly trap.

The little trapper's toes barely touched the ground, and he tried in vain to wrench his hand from the trap, and to drag the man from his perch in the tree.

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire!" exclaimed Gopher, in no good humor. "I have caught myself. The fingers are getting cold—as cold as ice! Is Tanglefoot really dead?"

Then he called aloud:

"Can't you come down? I am in your hands,

Timon Moss. I cannot get away. Midnight did not finish you, then?"

But not a word in reply.

The leaves above him did not stir, there was no breeze.

"I shall go mad!" cried Gopher Gid. "Must I yell to bring the Indians back? They could hear me at the camp—Midnight and Rube! I will shout even though I rouse the devils at the dog-feast. Tanglefoot is dead! That cold hand belongs to no living being!"

The boy lifted his voice and sent it through the forest, again and again, the shrill cry of "Help! help!" went down the grassy aisles of the wood, but elicited no response.

From the direction of the camp came a series of yells that seemed curious to the entrapped boy. He grew silent and listened; he heard the Indian drums, the yelps of dogs, the cries of savages.

"The orgies after the dog-feast!" he said, to himself.

To be held in mid-air by the hand of a dead man is not calculated to create pleasant sensations, even in the heart of the bravest individual.

Gopher no longer looked at the hand; his eyes were other where; he was trying to make out the figures that had crept across a belt of moonlight and disappeared not far away.

He had seen them for a moment; but in that brief period of time had recognized them as Indians.

Were they hunting him? Had the red boys told the story of the spectral hand at the village, and was he to fall into the power of the Sioux?

The boy's orbs were strained to keep track of the stooping figures now in the wood. Midnight Jack and Rube might be among them, for they wore the garments of the Sioux.

But the figures left him perplexed, mystified, despairing!

Daylight would soon come. Was that dreadful hand to hold him there forever? Never was prisoner better secured than he!

"I will end this!" he cried. "If I cannot pull my dead foe down I will climb up to him. Who ever was caught by a dead man before?"

Gopher Gid now tried to carry his newly formed project into execution. He swung himself against the tree, and when he had established a good momentum, he caught a limb with his only free hand and drew his body over it. But, his other wrist was still gripped by the deathly fingers!

He paused for breath and then parted the leaves that hid the body of his captor from his sight.

"Just as I expected!" he cried, starting back despite his words. "Tanglefoot was not killed in the camp. They put him alive in this tree. Ah! he could not come clear down; this rope held him fast; it lowered him to this place but would help him no further. Dead! dead as a herring."

The bloated but white face of Timon Moss was upturned to the little trapper. The Indians had washed it before burial, as if unwilling that the coward of the Rosebud should be buried with a scarlet skin. The little eyes were staring upward, expressionless, but shining still; the body lay upon two limbs, and the rope which reached far above and lost itself among the branches, told the boy that it was fastened in the top of the tree.

Tanglefoot regained consciousness to find himself immolated in the top of the tree.

The Indians had spared the gin-smuggler his revolver, which still stuck in his belt. It was soon in Gopher Gid's hands.

"It shall free me!" he cried, as he snatched it forth and set the hammer. "It shall unlock the trap that holds my hand."

With eyes that flashed for joy Gopher Gid leaned over the hand that clutched his wrist. He thrust the muzzle of the revolver against the lifeless pulse and touched the trigger.

There came a flash, a dull report, and the boy jerked his hand loose!

The arm of the dead was still hanging rigid from the foliage, but the wrist was so shattered as to be scarcely able to support the weight of the hand that dangled from it.

"Good-by, Tanglefoot!" said the boy hero, leaping to the ground. "I'm rid of you forever. Now I'll see the cave in the hill again!"

But, he did not hasten from the spot.

"They are over there in the camp!" he said. "They were going to help me to-night—Rube said so. Should I desert them? That would not be fair. Old Rube has helped me—he has saved me from Tanglefoot's revolver. And Midnight Jack's sister is yonder—that girl for

whom Gopher Gid would risk his life, if he never has seen her!"

A moment later the boy was gliding from the scene of his exciting adventures—hastening straight toward the Sioux village, to be near his friends who might be in danger.

"I wouldn't be worth shucks if I left them now!" he said. "One good turn deserves another. I'm nobody in particular. I've got nothing to live for. Nothing? Ah, I wonder if a fellow feels like as I do when he's in love."

The boy smiled to himself, even laughed; but he ceased abruptly, for, not twenty feet away, an Indian was drinking from a spring that bubbled from the ground.

Gopher Gid cocked the revolver in his hand, to see the savage leap to his feet and seize a repeating rifle.

"Sett'ag Sun!" ejaculated the little trapper, and then he touched the trigger.

But the hammer fell with a sharp click upon the empty cartridge, and the Sioux chief uttered a cry of sarcastic triumph thereat.

"I'll try again," was Gopher Gid's reply; but the same result ensued.

With an exclamation of rage, the little trapper threw the pistol at his feet.

He was at the mercy of Sett'ag Sun, for he stood in the moonlight, a splendid target for the Indian's aim.

"Shoot!" he said, aloud. "Better to be killed by an Indian than die by dogs or a dead gin-trader's hand!"

In response to his words, the chief's face dropped to the stock of his handsome rifle. Gopher Gid saw his eyes scintillate at the butt of the barrel.

"I'll face death with my eyes wide open!" he thought. "I guess I'll never see you, Dora!"

Then came the clear, ringing report of a rifle.

It awoke the echoes of the romantic little glade, in which Gopher Gid and his executioner had unexpectedly met.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DEATH-SHOTS.

SETTING SUN'S rifle was dashed from his grasp, and the chief sprang back with a tigerish cry of rage. In his red right hand he held a knife whose long blade glittered in the light of the moon.

Gopher Gid, unhurt, stood bewildered in his tracks; but he did not see the Sioux chief alone. From a clump of tall bushes, not far from the spring, a human figure had bounded like a panther. This individual was now approaching the Indian at a rapid gait, and the hand which he stretched out held a formidable "navy."

"Stand!" a stern voice said to Sett'ag Sun, who, hardly recovered from his consternation, was waiting for the attack, knife in hand. "Another step, and by the gold of Ophir! the Sioux 'll have to elect another chief!"

The savage obeyed the summons. Wonderment beamed in his eyes, but he did not move. A joyful cry burst from the little trapper's throat.

He now knew the man whose bullet had dashed his would-be-executioner's rifle to the ground. The voice—the well-known expression "By the gold of Ophir!" had fixed his identity.

Sett'ag Sun braced himself more firmly as that deadly pistol came nearer. He, too, knew the man who held it; the paint could conceal the road-agent no longer; the flash of the Sioux's eyes told that Running Water was not a Teton Sioux, but Midnight Jack of the Deadwood trail.

Instinctively the glistening knife crept menacingly back; but the road-agent's eyes caught the motion.

"None of that!" he said. "If you don't want the moonbeam fairies to get into your head, chief, you'll keep that knife still. I've got you, and this is the pistol that has never missed its target."

The chief glanced at Gopher Gid, who was standing an amazed spectator on the spot where he had first halted. Then he turned to Midnight Jack and made a singular motion with his left hand, which caused a halt.

"By the gold of Ophir!" was the response. "You don't mean it, chief?"

The sign was repeated.

It lowered the revolver, and the boy was surprised to see the two men shaking hands on the spot where he had expected—even hoped—to see Sett'ag Sun fall in the agonies of death.

"Come here, Gopher."

At these words the boy-trapper bounded forward, and halted before the pair.

"The dogs didn't devour you!" exclaimed Midnight Jack; "but their teeth have rent your clothes. The Indian boys lied."

"Lied?" repeated the youth. "What did they say?"

"They said that the dogs had torn you piece-meal in the woods. I believed them; we all did. But you are alive—worth all the dead men in the ground. By the riches of Ophir! I'm glad to see you here, chief."

Setting Sun fixed his eyes upon the disguised road-agent.

"Say on, brother."

"Not just here!" was the response. "Stand still, boy."

The red twain drew aside, and left the youth alone.

He did not hear what passed between them; he only knew that they, so lately enemies, were talking like friends; and just before they parted, he saw the chief's hand point to the south-east, and heard him say:

"She will be found there; that road is the broadest to her. My white brethren shall trail alone."

Then their hands met again, and Midnight Jack approached the boy. The Indian looked on, with arms quietly folded upon his ample chest.

"Come, boy!" he said; "we have found a friend. He will keep the promises he has just made me. I know the trail that will lead to my sister; we will strike it at daybreak. The horses are not far off if Rube has succeeded. By the gold of Ophir! I nearly shot a—"

He paused abruptly and glanced from the wondering eye of the boy to the bronze statue planted firmly in the moonlight.

Then he waved his hand at the Sioux chieftain and grasping Gopher's wrist, hurried him toward the forest where he had narrowly escaped with his life.

"I'm known to one half of the tribe by this time," fell from his lips, as they hastened over the ground. "Gods, boy! this has been the tightest rub of Midnight Jack's life. Everything depends on Rube and the red-skin back yonder—the red-skin especially. Hold on! where are we?"

The road-agent stopped and looked about like a man losing his bearings. He still held the little trapper by his hand.

"May I ask one question?" asked the boy, looking up into Lightway's face.

"Well?"

"What if Tanglefoot had unmasked you at the sun dance?"

"Death!" was the reply. "Nothing on earth could have saved us. The best shooting in America would have amounted to nothing, Gopher, absolutely nothing. But," with a flashing of the dark eyes, "he didn't quite tell on us, eh?"

"No! and thank fortune that he did not."

The journey was now resumed and the twain plunged into the woods. They crossed the belt at its narrowest part, and came out upon a rocky country through which a well-to-do stream was rushing with sullen plunge and roar.

"If Rube and the Indian boy have succeeded with the horses, whispered Jack. "Over there is the spot. Let me go ahead."

For the first time since leaving the spring Midnight Jack relinquished the young trapper's hand, and armed with his favorite revolvers which ingenuity had lately returned to him in the Sioux camp, he glided toward a rocky hill, and soon passed beyond Gopher's vision.

"There goes a brave man!" muttered the boy. "I wonder what ties link him to Setting Sun, the Sioux?"

Gopher's further meditations were cut short by the sudden cracking of fire-arms.

Bang! bang! bang!

The startling reports came from beyond the hill of rocks, and, snatching from his belt old Tanglefoot's pistol which the road-agent had filled with loaded cartridges, our young white brave bounded forward to the assistance of his friend.

But Midnight Jack did not need help.

A pistol flash greeted Gid's sight as he reached the rocks, a loud report filled his ears, and he saw a dark figure fall back among some bushes.

The road-agent stood erect upon a bowlder, with pistoled hands outstretched and fire in his eyes. Below him lay the bodies of three Indians, a bullet hole in the head of each, and a pair of moccasined feet protruding from the clump of bushes just mentioned told the story of the last shot.

"When will the red devils learn that Midnight Jack never misses?" he cried, seeing the boy at his feet, and then he quickly continued: "I more than half suspected this. They overheard us in the camp; they were lying here to meet Rube with the horses. You say you saw

figures in the woods? These are the fellows. But they'll never form another ambush."

"Never!" echoed Gid. "But are they all here?"

"All?" said Midnight, as if insulted. "Did any escape who filled the wagon down on the Deadwood trail? With these destroyers none ever get away," and the now smiling Sioux-killer held the beautiful pistols admiringly before Gid's eyes.

"We'll wait awhile for Rube," he continued. "My shots will bring him up he says; he knows the voice of my Indian-slayers. Hark! horses now!"

The unmistakable sounds of a horse's approach. Midnight Jack sprang from the rock, and crouching on its shady side looked into the moonlit spot where the bodies of his red victims lay.

Presently a shadow fell across the trunk of a young tree, and crept toward the stricken Sioux.

"Another Indian!" said Gid.

"That shadow-caster an Indian?" ejaculated the road-agent. "Why, you're insulting the whole Sioux tribe, boy. Now, watch."

Then a low cry fell from Midnight Jack's lips; the shadow straightened up and its maker came into view.

"By the jumpin' jingo! who did this?" cried a rough voice, and the speaker's long arm was pointing at the red-skins. "We heard yer shots an' hurried up. Yonder ar' the hosses; but we hed a time. Thar war wolves around the corral, an' Injuns, too. We fought 'em both, an' the three what felt the claws ov the Screamin' Eagle, got pitched among the hosses."

The road-agent and the little trapper stood before the speaker, still arrayed in his Indian disguise which was sadly dilapidated.

Rube was surprised to see Gopher Gid; but led the couple to three strong-limbed horses whose rope halter-strings were held by a young Indian.

"The boy ar' uneasy!" he whispered Rube at Midnight's ear. "He said awhile back that he heard his horn blow, an' he'd wade through blood an' fight sin an' death single-handed jest to clutch that bugle erg'in."

The quartette were not long in mounting. Gopher Gid was seated behind Mouseskin, the Indian boy, who for fear of being denounced as the slayer of Feel-the-Sky had united his fortunes with those of our friends, and was leaving the Indian village—never to return! We shall see.

When all was ready the party set out, skirted the bank of the rapid river for awhile, and then left it to pursue its course alone.

All at once a strange sound fell upon the ears of all.

"The horn!" exclaimed Rube. "Look at the Injun! he's got the fidgets. There it goes erg'in!"

"Yes! yes! Custer's bugle. My sister is there!" cried Midnight Jack.

But the old borderer did not seem to hear him.

"Quick!" his rough voice cried, and his hand shot across the road-agent's face in a futile effort to seize the bridle of Mouseskin's horse. "Look! the red imp is goin' to run off. He's mad! crazy! bewitched! Catch 'im, Mid—thar! he's gone!"

The Screamin' Eagle had spoken truly, for the young Sioux with one sweep of his right arm had flung Gopher Gid to the ground, and was dashing away in the direction from which the bugle-blast had proceeded.

Instantly the road-agent's pistol leaped from his belt, and a ball went whizzing after the young Sioux who seemed to have been rendered insane by the sound of his lost trumpet.

"Fetch the boy!" cried Midnight Jack, and the next instant his horse, with a snort and a mad plunge, darted after the mad young Sioux.

The road-agent leaned forward as if he could thus urge his steed to greater speed. He held the bride in his left hand, and at his right side hung a revolver.

Fire flashed in his eyes.

Woe to Mouseskin if he distanced the western knight of the road and offered injury to the fair being who he believed had blown the piercing blast.

On, on through moonshine and shadow went the two Indian steeds.

CHAPTER XVI.

A THRILLING MEETING.

RUBE RATTLER leaned forward and jerked the little trapper from the ground to a position behind him before he could recover from his bewilderment.

Then he gave his steed the word, and away he went, carrying his double-burden with apparent ease and willingness.

"Don't bother me with questions, boy," said the old borderman. "I want to come up with that Injun imp—I jest want to plant the bunched claws of the Screamin' Eagle over his eyes. He'll think I am a reg'lar sky-scraper!"

With astonishing fidelity Rube kept in the wake of Midnight, who had disappeared, for all at once the twain saw a horseman leisurely awaiting them. They knew him at once, in the beautiful moonlight, and when they came up they saw that the road-agent was biting his lips in evident bad humor.

The cause was plain. Mouseskin had eluded him, and Midnight Jack declared that the sound of the hunted hoofs had ceased as suddenly as they had started from the place of ambush.

"We can do nothing till morning. We will rest here. Dora, my sister, cannot be far off. Maybe we will hear the bugle again before dawn. Let no one sleep."

The two guided their animals to a shady spot, and prepared to wait for the dawning of another day. The ears of each were eager to hear the blast of the famous trumpet again; but hour after hour passed away and the silence remained unbroken.

Daylight came; the long arrows of light penetrated that quarter of Sioux-land, and at last the beams of the rising sun came to further beautify the scene.

"Not followed yet!" was the ejaculation that fell from the road-agent's lips, as he turned his eyes toward the Indian village which all had lately left. "Setting Sun will keep his promise; he said that we should not be followed. If I had known day before yesterday that he was—"

"Go on, Midnight. I understand you," interrupted Rube, catching the speaker's eye.

If I had known that, there might be life in Timon Moss to-day—"

"I'm right down glad that ye didn't know it!" said Rube. "I'll hev no opposition now."

The road-agent gave the gaunt speaker a queer glance; the boy also darted a questioning look into his good-humored countenance.

"No opposition?" echoed Midnight. "Are you going to follow his calling—you a gin-trader?"

"Yes, when they run a telegraph line to the moon!" was the answer. "Not thet, Midnight. My temperance principles is to bu'st the kegs—like Gopher an' me did fur Tanglefoot. I never liked the old feller, anyhow. Thar's a widder on Washoe street, in Deadwood—Mrs. McGee, six children an' a boardin'-house;—them's her dow'ry. Tanglefoot was the opposition party in the matter. Can't ye see?"

Though his thoughts at that moment were far away, and with one for whom he would have given his life, Midnight Jack could not repress a smile.

The boy laughed merrily until a look from the old borderer severely rebuked his levity.

"It's a fact!" blurted Rube. "The dow'ry would check some fellars, fur any home with six children is a boardin'-house, but I've gone too fur to recede."

"Gopher and I will congratulate you!" said Midnight, with all the gravity he could at that moment assume. "But this is hardly the place to discuss love affairs. We have a work to perform. Let us find the trail."

"I'm with ye, thar!" responded Rube. "Arter 'while we'll talk about the widder."

The hunters now began to seek for that trail which each was eager to strike, and high noon found them pushing in a south-easterly direction with an alacrity which seemed to insure success.

It was near the close of the day that followed the startling blast from Custer's bugle, when a handsome white man emerged from a cave in one of the deep canyons of Sioux land, and looked up at the dark cliffs that seemed to touch the lofty sky.

The stillness that enwraps those canyons for weeks and months at times, lay about the solitary man; he saw no living objects. The gray walls were dead in color; the stones around him had been washed by some swift river of the long ago; the sun had never bleached them, for its rays never reached the bottom of that great ravine.

The solitary observer of this solitude looked little like a hunted individual. His face was fair, well-shaped, and almost feminine in expression. A mass of raven hair, long and inclined to curl, had been brushed back from his temples. His garments were not of the best,

but the cavalry jacket which he had lately worn into Red Cloud's camp had disappeared, and he was clad in habiliments seen oftener at the United States forts and in the frontier towns than among the canyons of the upper Missouri country.

He cast a quick look behind at the mouth of the little natural cavern which he had just left, and then moved down the old river bed.

"Don't I know every foot of this old place?" he murmured. "I've been here before. There're precious few places in this country I am not familiar with. The girl's in the best quarters. She's a veritable tigress; but I'll make a lamb out of her before I make her Mrs. Golden George. Any one with half an eye could see that they are brother and sister. I said so—to myself—when I first saw her at Sully, and when the major told me that she was hunting for a lost brother, I knew I could find him within twenty-four hours. But I didn't—no, I didn't. What am I hiding here for, anyhow? Tanglefoot has sold them out. Midnight will never settle accounts with Golden George; but I wish he knew before he passed in his checks, that I am going to keep the threat I made long ago. I thought I'd have to go East and court the girl there; but fortune brought her out here and put her right into my hands. What am I here for? Ah, yes! the agency. It is near at hand, and I want to see who are there before I take Dora down to rest for a few days."

Golden George was a goodly distance from the spot where fate had thrown Dora Lightway into his hands. He was conducting her south—to the dilapidated "Indian Agency," so called, but not now occupied by the government. But there were white faces there—a rough lot of fellows, and not a few villainous half-breeds, who always welcomed the Sport to their midst. The gambler's last visit to the agency had not ended in a tranquil manner. He had been compelled, in self-defense, to shoot a desperate character, and then fly for his life. Since then rumor had told him that Nugget Noll had recovered. If he was now at the "Agency," George would avoid the spot; if not he could take Dora there, and keep her until he wished to go on and introduce his new sweetheart to Deadwood society.

On both sides of this canyon were great fissures that led to the land above. Some were dark, and half-filled with a species of brushwood that seemed to have taken root in the very rocks themselves, while a streak of moonlight half revealed others, and made them less forbidding as passage-ways up or down.

In the dense little wood above, whose recesses were impenetrable even at noonday, the Sport had concealed his horse. To mount the animal and gallop to within a mile of the "Agency," dismount and reconnoiter afoot, was Golden George's intention.

"I'll go up the light one," he said, as he halted at the foot of one of the fissures, and saw the stony footpath clear to the top. "I met a mountain-cat in a dark one once, and I've got careful since."

With his mind on the pretty girl—his last sweetheart—Golden George began to climb the narrow stairway. He held a revolver cocked in his right hand; but made no secret of his ascent.

Why should he?

"Just let me find Nugget Noll dead!" he said, expressing his thoughts aloud. "I had the dead-drop on him that time. Black Bill said he saw him last summer at Standing Rock Agency; but Bill is a chronic liar. A dead-drop never failed me yet. I'd have got it on Midnight in the Indian town, if he hadn't got it on me. But it's all right now! all right, Dora, my Hour!"

Golden George was elated with his good fortune.

As he went up, he passed dark holes in the sides of the walls.

"Strange country, this. These holes look like devils' dens. The Indians say that they lead down to the bottom of the canyon, and if I was of an exploring turn of mind, I'd see about some of them. This canyon is full of them. Good places for a fellow like Nugget Noll to wait for the man he hates."

Golden George thought alone of his antagonist of bygone days, and not of the man who, lying on the ground above, was waiting calmly for his coming.

The dark eyes that looked through a clump of bushes at the top of the fissure flashed with triumph. They knew the man who was slowly ascending. If Golden George had climbed any other path on that side of the chasm, the tiger would have received him; if he had scaled one

on the other side, a bullet would have brought him down.

At last the hand of the Sport reached the bushes, then his head rose above the level, and—

A low cry of vengeance and a hand at his throat!

The Sport saw his enemy, and started back. His revolver fell from his grasp, and went rolling down the stony way. There was another at his head—behind it burned the devilish eyes of Midnight Jack!

Golden George did not try to articulate. He saw that the road-agent was leaning over the chasm, and, quick as a flash, he flung his arms up, knocked the revolver aside, and threw his body back.

A wild oath fell from Midnight Jack's lips; but though his body was dragged over the edge of the rock he did not loosen his gripe.

The two men began to roll down the ravine, to the amazement of a brace of persons who had suddenly appeared above.

But they soon disappeared, for the Sport's foot caught on a rock and checked the momentum; not only this, but it jerked the deadly foe to one side, and they shot into one of the cavernous openings as if hurled there by some giant power!

In the gloom they seemed to roll a great way downward, still clutching each other, but when they struck their gripes loosened, and they rolled apart.

For a moment silence succeeded the sudden halt.

Then the voice of Midnight Jack was heard.

"We've met again, Golden! Both of us shall never leave this pit of darkness alive; one of us may. We were certain to fight a duel to the death some day. It was but a question of time. You have lost your revolvers; so have I. Have you got a knife?"

"Yes!" came a voice from the gloom.

"Are you ready, Golden?"

"Ready, Midnight."

"So am I."

Unseen by each other the two foes dropped to the stone floor of the cave, and drew their knives.

The darkness was so intense that neither could see his hand when placed within an inch of his face.

It was an awful moment.

The rivals of the West—the road-agent and the Sport—the beau of the city and the Apollo of the road—had met to fight to the death far from the scene of their conquest—met for the last time.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

"COME, boy, we'll go down an' look fur 'em. They've grappled like b'ars an' hev roll c'lar to the bottom!"

Rube Rattler and Gopher Gid, somewhat surprised at the sudden disappearance of the two foes, began to go down the fissures. They believed that the antagonists had swept around a bend, and kept on to the foot of the cliffs. The shadows lay thick against the sides now, and the hunters did not see the cavernous openings as they descended.

They reached the bed of the cavern to find no signs of the men they sought.

"Queer!" ejaculated the Screaming Eagle, throwing a look of blank surprise into the little trapper's eyes. "It beats my time all holler! Didn't Midnight catch Golden up thar, an' didn't he pull 'im over the edge? The airth must hev swallowed 'em. Jest take notice of the stillness. Why, Gopher, we could hear a cricket walk."

The silence that reigned around them had already attracted our young hero. He was about to reply when the borderer sprang suddenly to the strong wall that rose above them and put his ear to a little fissure not wider than a finger.

"Come hyar, Gopher," he said, in a startling whisper that instantly brought the lad to his side. "This wall is holler, like a tree. Thar!"

Gopher started from the wall with a look of astonishment distending his eyes. There were human voices inside the rock; he had heard them!

"Are you ready, Golden?"

"Ready, Midnight."

"So am I."

For a moment Rube stared at the rock like a man suddenly bereft of his senses.

"This is the devil's work, Gopher!" he gasped, seizing the little trapper by the shoulder. "How did they get in thar? How? Why the rock opened an' swallowed 'em. Did you hear, boy? They're goin' to fight to the death. Think

what a fight it will be atween Golden George and Midnight. Wouldn't ye like to see it, boy?" Gopher Gid's eyes flashed.

"Yes; but I'd rather find the girl!" he said.

"I wouldn't," was the response. "The fight—the fight! We'll go up ag'in. Ef the hole that let 'em in is open, we'll see suthin' of thet death-scrimmage."

The boy found himself dragged to the foot of the stony pathway by the excited and eager hunter, and the next minute the twain were ascending.

Meanwhile, into the gloom of the cavern into which fate had precipitated them, Midnight Jack and Golden George, face to face, yet unseen by each other, were approaching that combat which could not be avoided.

They had once been friends; but a wrong perpetrated by the Sport had transformed them into rivals—enemies! And the Sport had vowed to wed the sister of Midnight Jack, even if he were obliged to court her in the luxurious parlor of that home from which a father's curse had driven the only son.

Did the road-agent know that the bitter foe whom he faced knew where that sister was at that moment? No; but he believed that Dora was not far away. The mystery of the bugle had almost ceased to bother him. They had come across the trail of Red Cloud's band returning from the Agencies; and he had said to Rube:

"That blast was blown by one of those Indians. They found the bugle; and Mouseskin knows this now."

This was true. The blast which had startled the quartette was blown by Indian lungs, and the Sioux boy was now following the band, hoping to recover his trumpet which had been picked up by one of its number, and now hung from his girdle. Golden George, in a fit of rage at his beautiful captive, had flung the silver bugle far from the trail which he had made toward the canyon.

But to return to the foes in the rock.

Midnight Jack did not advance; but remained where he had stopped. He knew the aggressive nature of the man with whom he was dealing. Golden George, in such a position as this, would attack.

But nothing indicated his coming. The road-agent put out his hand and touched a wall.

"Ha!" he thought, as he hugged it closely. "He cannot attack from one side at least!" and he waited on.

By and by a slight sound disturbed the silence. It sounded like the fall of a pebble from an insignificant elevation.

Midnight turned quickly. He knew that Golden George had also found the wall, and that he was following it—coming toward him!

No more pebbles fell to indicate the movements of the Sport, but Midnight felt the approach of a Presence which he could not see. He knew that Golden George was still following the wall, as surely as if he saw his every motion.

Nearer and nearer came the Sport, stopping now and then to listen, only to advance again with a long-bladed Mexican knife in his right hand. Suddenly and noiselessly the road-agent stood up; but bent forward with eagerness.

He knew where the Presence was.

All at once the left hand of Midnight Jack which rested lightly against the wall above his head darted through the gloom with the swiftness of a descending eagle.

A wild oath followed; the Presence seized by that hand bounded from the stone floor, and a flash of fire succeeded. It was the meeting of the blades as the enemies struck simultaneously at each other's heart.

Midnight Jack did not relinquish the hold which he had obtained. Exerting all his strength he suddenly swung his foe to the left, and struck again in the gloom. But he miscalculated the position of the Apollo's heart, and his knife struck the stone wall to snap at the handle and drop with a ring upon the floor.

A laugh of devilish triumph rung out in the gloom from Golden George's lips, and before it ceased the road-agent turned like a tiger and fell with his full weight upon him.

No human being could have withstood that onslaught. The blow that the Sport dealt as he went backward made a wound from which the life-blood of his foe spouted like a long pent-up tide; but it did not reach the heart for which he had intended it.

The Sport was thrown from his feet, but he did not fall; the great strength of his adversary prevented.

"This is to the death, Golden—remember!" fell from Midnight Jack's lips, the first words uttered in that cavern for many minutes.

"To the death, of course, Midnight!" was the rejoinder. "You're struck! Your blood spurted clean into my face."

"But it never leaped from my heart!"

"Oho! well, I'll tap that fountain!"

"If you can, Golden."

The last word had scarcely left the road-agent's lips when he threw his antagonist half-way round and his knife hand struck the stone-wall heavily.

A cry told him what had befallen George. His knife, too, was gone!

The foes now grappled. In that Stygian gloom they went down to rise again, and fight with the weapons which Nature had given them. Now against the walls, now in the middle of the cave, now up, now down, they fought—to the death!

Once they paused for breath, standing erect like gladiators, the hand of each at the throat of the other; then at it again.

But this could not always last.

Midnight suddenly wrenched his foe from him; he flung him away and fell to the ground himself. As he did so something slid from under his feet—Golden's lost knife.

With a cry which he could not suppress, Midnight seized the weapon, and listened. Beyond a dull thud that had followed his last success, he heard nothing of the Sport.

Many moments, knife in hand, the road-agent waited for a renewal of the combat; but it came not. At last he called the name of his foe; silence, as before!

"I'm armed; all the advantage is with me!" he said, to himself. "Golden struck the wall. Maybe—"

He said no more but began to circumnavigate the cavern, his hand on the wall to guide him.

All at once he stopped and sprung back, his hand had touched the Sport's flesh.

"I'm going to pass in my cheeks, Midnight," said a voice, in the gloom. "You've got my knife. I know it; but you needn't use it. There's nothing left of my head; you threw me plump against the wall. My last dust is on the table, and death holds all the trumps. Midnight, I didn't get to do it; no, I cannot keep my word! Your sister is in the canyon. Follow the bed westward to the petrified trunk of a tree. The cave is there. I left her safe. I was going to see if Nugget Noll was at the Agency. Didn't want to meet him, you know. Midnight, this tussle has been to the death. Where are you?"

"Here, Golden," and the victor crept forward till he bent over his foe—till he clasped the hand of the dying man.

"Did you tell Dora that—"

"No, I didn't," was the interruption; "but she more than half suspects. That girl has come away out here to make a man of you. Your father is dying; he wants you back. You ought to hear her tell how he took back the curse of exile; how—"

"Stop, Golden! let me think a moment. I am going back. I almost wish we hadn't met thus."

"No! that's not the way to talk. We were born to fight right here—that's my doctrine. You needn't tell the boys how I died. Let 'em think that I just disappeared. I'm going to quit talking now. Death has clutched Golden George's last stakes. I—throw—down the—cards!"

Midnight Jack knew what was coming; he felt a shiver run through the hand he held.

The death gurgle broke the silence of the scene, and the fingers of Golden George, the Sport, fell from the road-agent's hand.

All was over!

"A man of his word!" said Midnight, rising. "He found his own tomb, and died in it. Good-by, Golden! I believe your doctrine, too. We were bound to fight to the death!"

The road-agent now turned his attention to escape from the cavern; and all at once he heard a human voice.

"This must be the place! Stay behind! I'll drop into the hole, for the Screamin' Eagle of the Smoky Roost has been in dark holes afore!"

Midnight Jack uttered a cry of delight, and the next instant the friends met.

"Look to the north, Dora. Up yonder is Sioux-land. Would you go back there?"

"Yes, to find the brother I have sought. Jack, if they had killed me—"

"I would not be here within sight of Fort Sully. What did I write on the wagon which I loaded with dead Indians?—that I would exterminate the Sioux nation! But you live, Dora. I thank heaven I had not your death to avenge!"

"It is good-by to the road now?"

"No! it is farewell forever!"

When Midnight Jack rode boldly into Fort Sully, he was at once put under arrest by the commandant. But a sweet face and a sweeter voice pleaded for his release, and Midnight dared the colonel to point to one loyal citizen whom he had plundered. Then came the story of the father's curse—the exile—the stirring scenes which we have witnessed in the course of this narrative, and—the release.

The shout was now, "Eastward ho!"

Gopher Gid—or Gideon Weston as the boy's true name was—looked into the hill home again and bade it farewell.

A pair of eyes had more fascination for him than that little hermitage, and he made one of the East-bound party.

Time has rolled on. The soldier father is dead; the exile is a prosperous man far from the golden coast; and the little trapper's love has just been rewarded by the bestowal of a woman's hand.

Rube Rattler—he is back on the frontier where he tells with gusto how he hung for six hours in the sun-dance, by fastening the torture cords to straps beneath the old cavalry jacket!

He took the widow McGee, "dow'ry" and all.

THE END.

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